"Stabilising" the Middle East: A Historical Perspective

by Lorenzo Kamel

The relevance of "continuities" in relation to the history of the region and its inhabitants has been evident throughout most of its millenary past, and from a wide range of different angles. For instance, the Epic of Gilgamesh (c. 2100 BCE), a literary product of Mesopotamia, encompasses a number of themes and motifs (including, among others, the flood myth adopted in the narrative of Noah's ark) later included in the Bible and other religious books.

The history of Jerusalem (5000 years old) represents another powerful example. As noted in a study published by the Ingeborg Rennert Center for Jerusalem Studies at Bar-Ilan University, "Canaanite Jerusalem had two holy sites; both were above and outside the city walls. Shalem was probably worshipped in the area of the Temple Mount, which later became the holiest site for the Jews and the third most holy site for Moslems."[1]

These and a plethora of other possible examples are hardly surprising. Every "invader", in fact, has, to some extent, left its mark upon the region and its inhabitants. In Jacques Weulersse's words, "Hittites, Arameans, Assyrians, Sea Peoples [...] didn't vanish, they changed their capitals, sometimes altered languages and customs, they hardly touched the rural population, already bound to the soil [*déjà lié au sol*]".[2]

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[1] Ingeborg Rennert Center for Jerusalem Studies, "History of Jerusalem from Its Beginning to David", in *Jerusalem: Life Throughout the Ages in a Holy City*, February 2017, https://www.biu.ac.il/JS/rennert/history_2.html.

[2] Jacques Weulersse, *Paysans de Syrie et du Proche-Orient*, 2nd edition, Paris, Gallimard, 1946, p. 56 (Translation by the author); Lorenzo Kamel, *Imperial Perceptions of Palestine. British Influence and Power in Late Ottoman Times*, London/New York, I.B. Tauris, 2015, p. 197.

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Yet, "continuities" have at times been disguised also as "ruptures". To mention just one relevant example, when it comes to the Arab conquest of the 7th century, the region encountered what was likely the most pervasive – but also one of the most "natural" – invasion(s) witnessed in the area. Through it, Arabs introduced the language, religion and type of government embraced by a large percentage of the local inhabitants. The majority of the latter remained predominantly Christian until the beginning of the 11th century: as a general tendency, thus, Islam was not imposed by force.

This does not mean that the conquest was greeted by locals "with open arms", and even less that present-day populations are the "direct and pure" descendants of the ancient ones – but, instead, that most of the local inhabitants were Arabised in a natural way, in a process of continuity, thus maintaining what in modern times would have been called a "cultural basis".

This is so not only in consideration of the small number of new invaders but also in virtue of the fact that the Arabic that was introduced markedly preserved the sound of the ancient tongues spoken in the region.

As noted by Basem Ra'ad, "Arabic has the same sound system as Cana'nite, reflected in the 28-sign alphabets of both. Ugaritic also has the same sounds, except that the 30-sign alphabet has three signs for the aleph: ā, ū, ē. As the only liv[ing] language in the region for many centuries, Arabic can be said to be the storehouse containing the

inventories of earlier languages."[3]

Maxime Rodinson, committed to exposing the approaches designed to deny or minimise any continuity in the region's history, broached the subject by focusing on the Palestinian context: "A small contingent of Arabs from Arabia did indeed conquer the country in the seventh century [...] the Palestinian population soon became Arabized under Arab domination, just as earlier it had been Hebraicized, Aramaicized, to some degree even Hellenized. It became Arab in a way that it was never to become Latinized or Ottomanized. The invaded melted with the invaders".[4]

Yet, it is toponyms, more than human beings or invasions, that often are the most revealing element to understand the impact of "continuities". Many of the names of the cities in the region are in fact today still pronounced by local populations adopting the same phonetic structure that can be inferred from four thousand years old Egyptian hieroglyphics, or from the Amarna Letters. This includes also the "oldest inhabitated city in the world", Ariḥa/Jericho (in present-day West Bank/Palestine).

Despite this, a number of prominent scholars had – and often still have – the tendency to focus more on "ruptures" than on "continuities". In his classic book, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, Albert Hourani chose for instance

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[3] Basem L. Ra'ad, *Hidden Histories. Palestine and the Eastern Mediterranean*, London, Pluto Press, 2010, p. 187.
[4] Maxime Rodinson, *Israel and the Arabs*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1968, p. 319-320.

the first major conquest of an Arab-speaking country, Algeria, by France (1830–47) as the first key turning point of his analysis on the region and the "age of European empires". From then on, Hourani contended, Muslim states and societies could no longer live in a self-sufficient system of inherited culture: "their need was now to generate the strength to survive in a world dominated by others."[5]

It must be clarified that the historical context that paved the way for this epochal outcome was nonetheless rooted in earlier imperial dynamics, that had in Napoleon's invasion of Egypt (1798) – the first modern incursion by the West into the Middle East – its most celebrated example.

Napoleon, like most of the major statesmen of his time, aimed to take advantage of the growing instability of the Ottoman Empire, whose initial regression can be traced back to a number of causes. These included the abolition of the Timar, and the outcomes of cold and drought during the Little Ice Age, when the rising population pressure and resource shortages created the conditions for the outbreak of the Celali Rebellion (1595–1610) – a turning point in Ottoman fortunes, particularly in terms of agriculture and economy.

Yet and despite their relevance, none of these figures or historical facts represented, from the perspective of the region's inhabitants, a concrete rupture. The latter occurred only in the

first decades of the 20th century, when large part of this region experienced, for the first time in history, a process of ethno-sectarian racialisation that might be termed the "Lausanne *zeitgeist*".

It was indeed following the Balkan Wars (1912–13), the Armenian genocide (1915–16) and the Greco-Turkish Treaty signed at Lausanne (1922–3), that the *racialization of identities* – that is, the tendency to ascribe a nonmutable, culturally genetic profile to a group – as well as the ethno-sectarianization of communal identities[6] – meaning the process of turning the affiliation to a given confession into a defining and exclusive element of ethnic consciousness – acquired legal validity.

In other words, the Treaty of Lausanne provided a decisive component needed for the transformation of Greece and Turkey – and, more generally, large parts of the Middle East – on the base of "sectarian" (Eastern Orthodoxy and Sunni Islam), rather than simply religious (Islam versus Christianity) criteria. More specifically, the Turkish delegation at the Treaty of Lausanne, headed by the future second President of Turkey, İsmet İnönü (1884–1973), worked, under the auspices of Britain and France, towards a policy of selective racialisation and minoritising of local peoples, whilst promoting a sense of "diversity" and tolerance.[7]

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[5] Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, Cambridge, Belknap Press, 2002, p. 263.

[6] Lorenzo Kamel, "From Pluralization to Fragmentation. The Iraqi Kurdish Case from an Historical Perspective", in *Nuova Rivista Storica*, Vol. 103, No. 1 (January-April 2019), p. 251-265.

[7] Hakem Al-Rustom, "Between Anatolia and the Balkans: Tracing Armenians in a Post-Ottomans Order", in Kathryn Babayan and Michael Pifer (eds), *An Armenian Mediterranean. Words and Worlds in Motion*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan,

Historically speaking, the exchange of populations was hardly unknown: unofficial transfers, that is, "demographic warfare" partially resembling consensual exchange of populations, were, for instance, tacitly agreed between the Russian and Ottoman empires in the latter part of the eighteenth century.

Within this frame it should be noted that, between 1894 and 1924, Christian minorities across Anatolia were targeted by successive Turkish governments and passed from 20 to 2 percent of the local population.[8] At the same time, between the early 1820s and 1922 about 5 million Muslims were expelled from their lands: the present-day map of the Balkans and the southern Caucasus is composed by countries whose broad ethnic and religious homogeneity was accomplished, in Justin McCarthy's words, "through the expulsion of their Muslim population".[9]

Yet, it was only with the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) that these concepts of "population transfer" and "ethnic cleansing" became, for the first time in history, an accepted and "institutionalised" legal solution to international conflicts: a "pattern" that was then replicated, *mutatis mutandis*, in Palestine (through the Peel Commission of 1937) and India/Pakistan (with the partition of 1947).

The Lausanne *zeitgeist* – and all that it embodied and represented – coincided with the major rupture in the history of the region, and changed the perceptions and self-representations of its inhabitants for good.

Any credible attempt of "stabilising" the Middle East cannot but pass through the deconstruction of these dynamics and a simultaneous process of getting *back* into history, that is: sustaining shared notions of belonging, while rediscovering the continuities and permeabilities that, for millennia, characterised daily life in the region.

Jews, Christians, Muslims and the members of any of the millenary "pagan religions" of the Middle East (Mandaeans, Zoroastrians, Druzes, Kalasha, Yazidis and many others) indeed have much more in common than what is now fashionable to acknowledge.

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2018, p. 154.

[8] Benny Morris and Dror Ze'evi, *The Thirty-Year Genocide. Turkey's Destruction of Its Christian Minorities, 1894-1924*, Cambridge/London, Harvard University Press, 2019.

[9] Justin McCarthy, *Death and Exile. The Ethnic Cleansing of Ottoman Muslims, 1821-1922*, Princeton, Darwin Press, 1995, p. 1.

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