

Conference – 10th of March 2015

“REGIONAL STAKES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

AND THE ISLAMIC STATES OF IRAQ AND THE LEVANT”

Summary

Nicolas Boblin

(Research Assistant)

Brussels, 19th of March

On the 10th of March 2015, the European Institute of International Relations organized the fifth session of the Academia Diplomatica Europaea called “**Regional Stakes in the Middle East and the Islamic States of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS)**”. The chairman of this conference was **Nicolas Boblin**, research assistant at the IERI and scholar in International Relations and Political Science.

The first speaker of the conference was **the Director of the IERI, Irnerio Seminatore**, who opened the session with a general and historical speech about the Jihadist threat and the balance of power in the Middle East. He talked about regional conflicts, borders conflicts inherited from the civilization, interest conflicts linked to natural resources exploitation, the antagonism between Sunni and Shiite, Arab and Persians and finally the clash of civilizations.

Then, the chairman passed the floor to **His Excellency the Ambassador David Walzer of the Israeli Mission to the European Union and to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization**. The Ambassador made an overview of the current regional stakes in the Middle East and spoke about some of the essential players in the region. He explained that “In the end of 2014 and the beginning of 2015, the broader Middle East is characterized by a very deep crisis without any definitive winner or loser” yet.

From his point of view, Iran has the upper hand in the region. It is also of the fact that the American administration is looking very forcedly for an agreement with Iran. About the Nuclear dossier, H.E.M. Ambassador Walzer pointed out that “Americans see Iran as a potential positive player in the region”. Indeed, on

this background, the weakness of Saudi Arabia is relatively obvious since the change of generation with the king's death.

However, to the Ambassador's mind, "There is a struggle in Iran between those who support an agreement, mainly because of the economic release and those who are against such an agreement, mainly because they think that such an agreement, by the end, will weaken Iran, bring a regime change and will demolish the idea of the Iranian revolution". He understood non-enthusiastic Iranians because, to their mind, the Non Proliferation Treaty and the 5+1 negotiation represent indeed an "exercise" by America to bring a regime change in Iran. He highlighted the issues that encourage and support internal discussions, struggles and debates: the illness of the supreme leader, the collapse of the oil prices and the upcoming elections for the council of experts.

Regarding Iran situation, his conclusion is that "Reaching a final agreement by 2015 will furthermore increase Iran influence in the region and will toughen Iran position in places such as Irak and Syria". He added that even if a deal is reached, that will not make the U.S. and Iran into close allies.

Concerning the nuclear dossier, he quoted the editor chief of the Saudi Arabia TV station "al Arabiya" who published an article untitled "Obama, please listen Netanyahu". Therefore, Netanyahu's position about this agreement is shared by many in the Middle East.

The Ambassador pointed out that the real danger is that if Iran gets the bomb, this will open a "mad house race" in the Middle East. Other players will try and probably succeed in getting their hands on the bomb. "A nuclear Middle East, can you just imagine what a threat it would be for the entire world?", he claimed to the audience.

Then, The Ambassador Walzer described the Islamic States of Irak and the Levant (ISIS) as a radical development of political Islam which is not new in the region. However, the fact that Daesh declared itself as a khalifa is a tremendous change. He paralleled ISIS achievements in Irak and Syria to the lack of success of the Muslim brotherhood both in Egypt and in Tunisia. The reason of ISIS success is the uncertainty from the West. The Israeli Ambassador thought that "the International coalition has just managed to contain ISIS but was not successful in combating and defending Daesh."

Regarding Palestine situation, The Ambassador's stand is that the lack of success in political process and the internal weakness of Mahmoud Abbas have brought the Palestinians to decide to "internationalize" the campaign against Israel. They hope that after the election in Israel on March 17th, the political process will be renewed. They seek for new support not only of America, but of the European Union or the Security Council.

His Excellency argued that Palestine is separated into two parts: "Palestine of Gaza and Hamas and Palestine of Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian Authority". The discordance is so important that it prevents any political cooperation between their leaderships.

When focusing on USA position, The Ambassador claimed that as Obama is coming closer to his last two years in power, his administration are working to set the legacy of his regime. "His legacy has to do much more with the environment, with Medicare, with the oil connection between Canada and the US, with the opening of an embassy in Cuba. War is not a popular issue in America". Nevertheless, this is again the American administration which will have to provide answer both for Ukraine and for ISIS.

To conclude, Ambassador Walzer of the Israeli Mission to the EU and to NATO foresaw the questions to come and assured that "Israeli American relations have survived much deeper tensions than the tensions we have now. We hope to see the USA leading in front of any International initiatives to renew the peace process in the Middle East".

Ambassador Spyros Attas, Representative of Cyprus to the Political and Security Committee to the European Union was the third speaker of the conference. He presented a perspective of a European Union member state, but also a front-line state. Cyprus is part of the region where civilization first appeared and which inherited an important cultural background. However, it is a turbulent region tormented with long standing issues, such as the Middle East and the Cyprus ones.

He then stressed that latest developments that followed the Arab spring, the outbreak of the internal conflict in Syria, the emergence of Daesh but also the situation that we observe today in Libya, in Yemen and even further in the Horn of Africa and the Sub-Saharan region require a comprehensive, as well as a collective response. International terrorism is nowadays the most important

challenge. Daesh seeks to alter violently not only the borders but also the international order and to set up a "reign of terror".

He maintained that one of the reasons of the caliphate's instauration is the crisis in Syria. For a number of reasons, such as the support of local populations and outside support, the Assad regime is still able to survive. From Cyprus point of view, the best way to face up the situation is the formation of an inclusive government composed mainly by elements of the Baath party and the Assad's regime, but without Assad, members of the moderated opposition, as well as religious groups and more specifically Sunni, Alawite and Christian. This would be the best way to safeguard the integrity of the Syrian territory. Otherwise, the removal of Assad's regime would create a vacuum "as it already happened in Irak after the 2nd Gulf War or even more recently in Libya".

According to Ambassador Attas a new balance of power in the Middle East is emerging because of the new threat of Daesh. Indeed, he stressed, the major regional powers are readapting their long standing regional strategies and cautioned against allowing them to pursue their own geopolitical objectives, since some of them have proved to be untrustworthy. He agreed with the Ambassador Walzer's point of view on the US position in the Middle East. Concerning Egypt, he affirmed that its role is essential in fostering a pan Arab response to regional challenges both against Daesh but also against other peripheral military groups supporting the Islamic state.

Then, he spoke about the situation in Lebanon and in Jordan, countries which have been forced to stand a huge burden resulted from the threat of Daesh. Ambassador Attas believes in the role of the International community to support those countries and especially Lebanon because of its particular vulnerability. This support has to be directed on the enhancement of the Lebanese armed forces to help preserving its territorial integrity but also on the facilitation of the political process that will lead to presidential and parliamentary elections as soon as possible.

As a representative of an Eastern Mediterranean country, he stated that "Regional cooperation is very important. The discovery of hydrocarbons reserves in this region could and should serve broader cooperation at the regional level". He referred to last year's attempts by Cyprus to create trilateral cooperation mechanism on one hand between Cyprus, Egypt and Greece and on the other hand between Cyprus, Israel and Greece concerning energy, maritime

or tourism cooperation. Those mechanisms are open to participation by any countries in the region.

As for Turkey, the Ambassador recognized its important role in the Middle East. Nevertheless, the role of Turkey is sullied because of instances such as the breaking of the embargo against Iran and its ambiguous position with regard to Daesh. He maintained that “Turkey’s claims and actions in the exclusive economic zone of Cyprus have no legal foundation and are in direct conflict with International law”. Consequently, the President of Cyprus had no other option but to suspend his participation in the UN led negotiations because “no negotiation is possible under threat”.

The Ambassador mentioned the concrete action of Cyprus and informed that his country joined the International coalition, endorsed the use of British bases for military operation and granted permission to others to use military installations in Cyprus territory.

In conclusion, Ambassador Attas stated that the battle against Daesh is a battle of civilization against barbarism that unites people of every nation and religion.

After the Ambassador’s speech, the chairman gave the talk to **Carlo Facci PhD, political scientist and specialist of the Arab world.**¹ He made an analysis of the past four years of war in Syria and Iraq. To begin with, Dr Facci presented certain methodological elements in order for the audience to correctly apprehend the conflicts in the Near and Middle East.

The underlying theme of his analysis is the fact that “the concept of political gap, as a lack of power or influence is unknown in political science”; in international relations, the balance of power is constantly modified according to the fluctuating influence of its actors. Indeed, power is defined as the capacity to extend influence in relation to the strategic stakes which characterize a political system. This applies also to Syria and Iraq, where the emergence of ISIL needs to be understood as a political process as explained herein.

Dr Facci stressed the existence of political constants in the history of the Middle East, one is the *Question of Orient*. This was a major issue for the international relations in the 19th century, currently coming back to us with almost the same serious challenges (especially in its division between a Western and an Eastern

¹ Disclaimer: The views expressed by Dr Facci are solely those of the speaker and may not be regarded as stating an official position of the EU institutions.

World). Today, the new "Sick Man" is not anymore a country, but the balance of power in place, since the Sykes-Picot agreements, which acts as a balance defining the boundaries and the spheres of influence in all of the Middle East. Dr Facci recalled that the western guardianship on those territories was substituted with new forms of influence. This shifted the western domination from a political to an economic pillar, creating a growing political gap as from the end of WWII, which was filled by new political actors.

Further to this, another major aspect of the Middle East concerns its role in international relations. There, the strategic interests of major powers are intersected through regional conflicts. "The Middle East is a kind of sound box of conflicts much more important than what happens in the battle field of this little region". "These micro-conflicts can be seen as a global war, but *in vitro*"; in other words, it would illustrate the current cold war race between the Western and the Eastern block. Therefore, according to Dr Facci, Middle-Eastern countries, except for some rare cases, are constantly expropriated in their foreign policy and each of these regional conflicts reveal the nature of their relations with the global powers.

Dr Facci applies S. Rokkan's theory on political *cleavages*² in order to better apprehend Middle East related-issues. He counted three main political cleavages to be used in a comparative approach to describe the current situation: Secularism Vs. Political Islam; Shias Vs. Sunnis and Minorities Vs. Majority. The first cleavage appeared on a late stage of the Syrian war, when the Baas Power of Syria seemed to be the only actor able to contain ISIS political vision of Islam and State. The second cleavage deals with the issue of the *Leadership* in the Arab World after 9/11. The Palestinian cause is now far from federating the divided Arab people. Once again, the political gap has been automatically filled and religion is nowadays the main drive in order to ally people. Consequently, the main political actors deliver a specific interpretation of religious messages; Shia and Sunni have both political and ideological differences according to their political role and vision.

This fact, according to Dr Facci, brings us straight to the issue of ISIS as a political actor. "A political interpretation of a religion to serve the idea of the Islamic State" defines ISIS' action in the region. As a specialist of the Arab world, he explained to the audience that ISIS is the spearhead of the strictly

² Lipset, Seymour Martin; Rokkan, Stein (1967). Party systems and voter alignments: cross-national perspectives. Free Press. p. 554.

traditional Hanbali school's influence which considers that the original form of Islam has been corrupted by miscreant's contributions. The main objective of ISIS is to fight against those miscreants represented by different religions: Christians, Shiite Muslims, Alawites, Druses, Shabbaks, Yezidis, etc. Strategically, ISIS is trying to establish a base in the North-East of Syria and in the Euphrates Valley but also to eliminate the competition coming from other insurgents at the border with Turkey. By opposing other insurgents, it aims to establish a safe corridor towards Iraq, the heart of the Caliphate.

To come back to the cleavage of minorities Vs majority, Dr Facci affirmed that everyone can be seen as a minority in the Middle East but those minorities are essential to counter a totalitarian vision of the Islamic State in the region. Actually, religious minorities are the only one fighting against ISIS on the battlefield. From another perspective, they represent a dilemma for the United States in deciding which of them they have to support. This will have to be decided taking into account other factors such as the future negotiations with Iran and with the Syrian regime.

At the end of his speech, Carlo Facci claimed that "ISIS emergence is explained by the disintegration of the Sykes-Picot balance of power, which implies a loss of influence of the Western diplomacies in the region". According to him, there is a need for the western world to support religious minorities and to correct alliances in the Middle East. To this aim, Dr Facci stressed that a modus vivendi needs to be found for both Iranian and Syrian regimes, bearing in mind that the balance has already shifted and Russia is now a global power in the region. As a consequence, the future peace conference will need to deal with these issues using a different approach than Geneva I and II did.

The last speaker of this conference was the **Director of the Transatlantic Institute in Brussels Daniel Schwammenthal**. He made a speech focused on the negotiations about the nuclear dossier. He talked about U.S. positions: the U.S. administration which is leading the negotiation and the Congress which is skeptic about the strategy of this negotiation and the contours of a potential deal. In the end, the question is whether and to what extent Congress should have any say on the outcome of those talks.

Two bipartite bills are being discussed in the Congress. The first one is on the promises that there will be immediate sanction if no agreement is decided at the end of the negotiations (June 30 Deadlines) or if there is a violation of this

agreement. The second one is about giving Congress, more precisely the Senate, the right to renew any Iran deal and to give its consent.

Then, Mister Schwammenthal spoke about the open-letter signed by 47 members of the Senate to the leaders of Iran warning them that any deal that would not have an explicit approval of Congress would only be temporary and could therefore be down away “by the stroke of the pen, by the neck of the President”.

But where exactly do the two sides disagree?

One problem is the dimension of the enrichment possibilities that Iran would be left with at the end of such a deal. Several United Nations Security Council Resolutions have called on Iran to suspend all enrichment. However, the agreement already undermined this principle by allowing Iran for a transitional period a limited enrichment capacity. According to media report, it seems that “Iran would be left with several thousands of centrifuges which would leave Iran very closed to its desired goals”. The Director asked the audience “why would any country that claims to have only peaceful purposes for its nuclear program need an enrichment program in the first place?”.

The second issue is that the negotiations do not deal with Iran missile programs. Iran already has the region most advanced extensive missile programs and is potentially able to reach Europe with their missiles.

Another problem is the rearmament. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) affirmed that there had been zero process on this front. Moreover, President Obama had accepted the Iranian demand that any restrictions on its program be time-limited. This is the sunset clause. Daniel Schwammenthal warned that “If the Iranian regime doesn’t change by the end of the sunset clause, the country could easily pursue its nuclear program”. He reminded that Iran is a revolutionary regime and the world greatest sponsor of terrorism, including support of the Hezbollah and the Hamas.

The Director of the AJC Transatlantic Institute concluded as follows : “To what extent the debate that is now taking place within the U.S. on the virtues of the emerging deal and the potential role of Congress can play to shape it or maybe have an impact on the negotiation itself?”.

The audience was very receptive and discerning. The questions bring into the floor issues such as the differentiation between Iran of Ahmadinejad and Iran of

Rohani, the military position of Israel, the role of the Hezbollah in the development of the Islamic State, the impact of the development of ISIS in Europe and especially on the European youth and the way to guaranty political rights to Christian minorities.

The title of the next conference of the European Institute of International Relations, that will take place the 24th of March, is “Limits of the Major Power Control Action and the “Calculated-Tensions” in Asia-Pacific”, which will allow to continue the debate on the balance of power but to focus on another region. Different speakers from different institutions will intervene: the **Ambassador of the Mission of EU to Japan Visticioaia Budura**, Mister **Xavier Bara**, expert of defense from the Euro-Atlantic Association of Belgium, **Deputy Victor Bostinaru**, from the Delegation for the Relations with People's Republic of China and, as a chairman, **Major Serge Stroobants**, from the Royal Military School.