
Confronting the Unsaid: Historical Research and the Critical Interpretation of the Present Wars and Crisis in the Middle East and North-Africa

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“Io so tutti questi nomi e so tutti i fatti (attentati alle istituzioni e stragi) di cui si sono resi colpevoli. Io so. Ma non ho le prove. Non ho nemmeno indizi. Io so perché sono un intellettuale, uno scrittore, che cerca di seguire tutto ciò che succede, di conoscere tutto ciò che se ne scrive, di immaginare tutto ciò che non si sa o che si tace; che coordina fatti anche lontani, che mette insieme i pezzi disorganizzati e frammentari di un intero coerente quadro politico, che ristabilisce la logica là dove sembrano regnare l'arbitrarietà, la follia e il mistero. Tutto ciò fa parte del mio mestiere e dell'istinto del mio mestiere.”¹¹

Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922-1975), was a poet, film-maker, journalist, philosopher and intellectual but he was not a historian. He lived, however, in times in which his country was at the centre of complex entanglements of scale between national politics and cold war geopolitics. This resulted in a destructive season of terrorism and political manipulations in Italy. Pasolini denounced the collusion between neo-fascist militias, parts of the state apparatus, NATO and the CIA in the organisation of deadly terrorist acts in the country.¹² His position, as an intellectual, can be a source of inspiration when trying to reflect on how historians can tackle the present. Contrary to the periods they study in the archives, and for which they reflect on the heuristic status of the historical proof, they don't have such proofs for the present. What they have however, is, in addition to a considerable sum of information, the knowledge of some mechanisms, that might help interpret the present. This paper is an attempt to interpret current events in the Middle East, North Africa, Europe and the Mediterranean in the light of this inspiration, around the explicitation of a few facts that are often neglected or unsaid. In my case, part of this inspiration also comes directly from my work as a historian.

¹¹ Pasolini (Pier Paolo), Io so [I know], Il Corriere della Sera, 14 November 1974.

¹² See: Ganser (Daniele), NATO's Secret Armies. Operation Gladio and terrorism in Western Europe, Abingdon, Routledge, 2005, 336p and Silj (Alessandro), Malpaese. Criminalità, corruzione e politica nell'Italia della Prima Repubblica, Rome, Donzelli, 1994, 483p.

While preparing this article indeed, I recalled a scene that happened to me while I was in Cairo in 2011 for a research in the national archives of Egypt. I was studying the anthropology of urban violence during the French occupation of the city between 1797 and the early 1800s¹³: violence of the repression of popular revolts, agents provocateurs, sexual violence against women on the squares of the city... And suddenly, I saw what I was studying happen again, under a new form but with similar logics, under my eyes. I thought my approach as a historian was also relevant for understanding the present. Of course, I don't have the same proofs for the present as for the past. In the archives, for this case and for others I studied for the 19th and early 20th centuries, I found reports by *agents provocateurs* explaining the success of the intrigues, I found spies (who were officially diplomats, geographers, journalists or archaeologists) applying for their pension, I saw police officers explaining their strategies. I don't have access to such documents as for the present (but be sure they do exist somewhere). This is why historians have to be prudent. They have however a unique understanding of some mechanisms. On this basis, here are a few unsaid facts or constantly minimized configurations (geopolitical, ideological) that I think are important in order to be able to interpret the present with critical eyes and challenge the ideology that is sometimes hidden beyond false discourses of rationality. Historians of the future will do their work, starting where today's critical interpretations stop due to a lack of access to sources and to the overwhelming power of imposed narratives.

The first of these unsaid aspects, which seem to me of crucial importance due to its inertia, relates to the cold war origins of global Jihad. Starting in the mid-1970s, a form of interpretation of Islam was promoted by the CIA and some of its proxies (Saudi and Pakistani intelligence services) in order to challenge the geopolitical influence of Soviet Russia in Afghanistan.¹⁴ The aim was to pro-

¹³ Lafi (Nora), Mapping and Scaling Urban Violence: The 1800 Insurrection in Cairo, in: Urban Violence in the Middle East. Changing Cityscapes in the Transition from Empire to Nation State (eds U. Freitag, N. Fuccaro, C. Ghrawi) and N. Lafi, Oxford/New-York, Berghahn, 2015, 334p., p.29-51.

¹⁴ See: Cole (Steve), Ghost Wars. The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan and Bin Laden from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001, London, Penguin, 2004, 738p. and Hartman (Andrew), The Red Template: US Policy in Soviet-occupied Afghanistan, Third World Quarterly, 2002, 23-3, p.467-489.

voke a Russian invasion of the country in defence of the local communist government, and eventually a weakening of Russia's capacity of external domination. The Soviet invasion happened in 1979 and the alliance between the US, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and extremist militias lasted at least until the fall of the Soviet regime. This not only created a precedent and reinforced extremist ideologies: it also shaped entire networks of power between the US, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and those extremist militias. Members of such militias were later instrumental in the creation of Al-Qaeda and part of the networks of power involved in earlier phases remained. In the name of the fight against communism, the so-called West played with fire. One cannot forget this aspect when talking about Islam, radicalism and civilizational values.

Another tragic dimension is that the so-called West did not learn from this historical mistake, that counts among the causes of the 2001 tragic attacks in the US. The alliance with Jihadist groups and their financing, either directly or through proxies, remained an often-used tactic until 2016. In Libya, during the late-1970s and the whole 1980s, extremist groups of fighters were used, in addition to plots aiming at killing M. Qaddafi¹⁵, by British and US intelligence services in order to destabilize and fight the regime.¹⁶ Such tactics are better known and documented as for Cuba, but what happened in Libya was comparable.¹⁷ This kind of tactic was again applied during the so-called Arab Spring of 2010-2011.¹⁸ While as a historian I do know how to identify some of the *agents provocateurs* of the past (members of European intelligence services in Ottoman cities for example), of course I don't know how to establish the identity and exact extent of actions of such figures as for recent events. But their actions remind me of those of the past I have seen in the archives. The so-called Arab

¹⁵ Lewis (Neil), Memo Mentioned Killing of Qaddafi, The New-York Times, 5 October 1986.

¹⁶ See: Jenkins (Philip), *Whose terrorists? Libya and State Criminality, Crime, Law and Social Change*, 1988, 12-1, p.5-24. Also: Lafi (Nora), *Kâdhâfi Mu'ammâr al (1942-2011)*, Encyclopaedia Universalis, <http://www.universalis.fr/encyclopedie/mu-ammâr-al-kadhafi/>

¹⁷ See: Hamm (Mark), *State-organized homicide: A study of seven CIA plans to assassinate Fidel Castro, Making law: The state, the law, and structural contradictions* (1993): 315-46.

¹⁸ See : Lafi (Nora), *The "Arab Spring" in Global Perspective: Social Movements, Changing Contexts and Political Transitions in the Arab World (2010–2014)*, in S. Berger and H. Nehring (eds.), *The History of Social Movements in Global Perspective*, New-York, Palgrave, 677-702.

Spring included, indeed, a strong cold-war-style geopolitical dimension¹⁹, with the idea, fuelled by NATO experts (possibly under the influence of Polish members of this alliance on the model of tactics used in Ukraine) to use these revolts against pro-US dictators in Tunisia and Egypt (Ben Ali had been trained at a US military intelligence school and was a former CIA correspondent in the country²⁰) and against pro-Russian dictators in Libya, Syria and Yemen.²¹ This effort at inverting the nature of the revolts is one of the most ambitious (and ambiguous) CIA and NATO operations since 1989. I don't know all the mechanisms and all the people involved, but I recognize some of these mechanisms. What my studies in the archives about Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Greece, Lebanon and Syria in late-Ottoman times have illustrated, is how European powers allied with local factions and militias in order to push their own agendas. I suspect it was the case again in 2010 and 2011. This configuration, of course, induced a strong path dependency, of which today's chaos is a consequence. Instrumentalization is risky, as once stimulated, a situation can evolve by itself. Also, this had already been told by history. In Syria, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar, partly acting as proxies and partly following their own agendas, have been supporting various Jihadist groups since 2011.²² The birth of the Syrian branch of ISIS was partly a result of covert operations by Turkish intelligence services.²³ Moreover, many factions of revolts that have been labelled as simply "Islamist" are in truth Jihadist. The consequence is that, on the pretext of fighting the dictatorship, the country has been destroyed. The Russian intervention in support of the regime had to add itself its share of tragic damages, destructions and deaths. It is only in 2016 that Turkey stopped to support Jihadi groups in Syria. Saudi Arabia and Qatar, I don't know. As for the US, France and Great-Britain, their commandos on the ground long faced an ambiguous

¹⁹ See: Katerina Dalacoura (2012), *The 2011 Uprisings in the Middle-East: Political Change and Geopolitical Implications*, *International Affairs*, 88-1, p.63-79.

²⁰ Ware (L.B.), *Ben Ali's Constitutional Coup in Tunisia*, *Middle East Journal*, 1988, 42-4, p.587-601.

²¹ See: Curtis Ryan, *The New Arab Cold War and the Struggle for Syria*, *MERIP*, n.262, 2013.

²² Sanger (David), *Rebel Arm Flow is said to benefit Jihadists in Syria*, *The New-York Times*, 14 October 2012.

²³ See: Philipps (David), *Research Paper: ISIS-Turkey Links*, *HuffPost/Columbia University Institute of Human Rights*, 11/09/2014.

situation due to their support to groups whose relationship to the global Jihadist ideology was not clear.

I have more direct and indirect information about Libya. I have been doing my PhD about this country, in which I have been living during the period of the embargo. I know a lot of people there, both popular and elite, and in all sectors of the administration, on all sides and I have direct information on a daily basis. What I would like to say is first that after a series of more or less spontaneous popular protests against the dictatorship in Bengasi, the real starting point of the revolt of 2011 was when factions of armed Jihadist fighters attacked prisons in order to free jailed Jihadists and caserns in order to seize more arms.²⁴ From this moment on, there was no more peaceful revolt. A media campaign in the “West” labelled threats by the regime against these fighters (who had been present in the country for decades, often sponsored by foreign powers) as threats against the general population. This helped “sell” the idea of a no-fly zone in the “western” public opinion. This campaign resulted in the ‘vote of resolution 1973’ by the security council of the United Nations on 17 March 2011. On 19 March 2011, in total violation of this resolution²⁵, and betraying Russia and China, who had accepted the idea of a no-fly zone but not of an attack against the country, the US, Great-Britain and France launched a massive attack that eventually led to the fall of the regime after intensive bombings and months on fighting on the ground, where US, French and British commandos acted together with Jihadist militias. Some of these commandos, probably French, might have participated in the killing of M. Qaddafi. The war also made thousands of civilian victims. Also, the whole civilian infrastructure of the country was destroyed. Furthermore, it resulted in a double chaos: Jihadists everywhere, eventually turning against their former allies.

Having chosen to openly betray Russia was part of the major mistakes made by the NATO in Libya. If there is one thing I am sure of as a historian, it is that you do not betray Russia. The consequence of this fact is that Russia decided not to ever abandon Syria and to do everything necessary in order to protect the

²⁴ Lafi (Nora), Libye, Encyclopaedia Universalis, <http://www.universalis.fr/encyclopedie/libye/>

²⁵ See: Ulfstein (Geir) and Christiansen (Hege), The Legality of the NATO Bombing in Libya, *International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, 2013, 62-1, p.159-171.

regime. Now both Libya and Syria have been destroyed. Millions of refugees had to leave Syria. In Libya, Europe is now willing to establish a regime that controls migrations from Africa and already opened camps for refugees and migrants on a highly questionable basis. The Mediterranean became a sea of death.

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

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

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

The last unsaid aspect I would like to evoke relates to the identity of Europe. The question is not only what happens in the Mediterranean and Middle East, as “Europe” or “the West” are often used as implicit referents as for civilizational values. I was in Andalusia this spring. What struck me is how discourses inherited from the “Reconquista”, one of the most violent operations of ethnic and religious cleaning in history, are still strong today. This is the case for the whole identity of Europe, I think. When Nation-States were created, they were since the beginning generally unable to handle diversity: one state per each ideologically constructed people, religious uniformity, as the early modern *cujus*

regio ejus religio principle stated, no living together.²⁶ In the Mediterranean and Middle East, there was a tradition of living together in diversity, inherited from medieval and Ottoman times. Since the 16th century, the very idea of Europe has been against it (in the name of principles that we think are universalist): “Reconquista”, colonization, creation of post-Ottoman nation states. We have to question our own principles and identity in order to discuss the present situation. It is not “the West” and its principles against a region which would need to be taught as for civilizational values. Another cliché indeed in that violence is part of the DNA of the region. My 25 years of research in the archives of all the countries of the region invites me to challenge this vision. Violence was often produced by European powers under the form of colonial occupation and of massacres aiming at reinforcing it. The Napoleonic conquest of Egypt was a first deadly example. Algeria followed with 130 years of recurrent massacres and war crimes.²⁷ The French conquest of Syria between 1918 and 1925 was also a history of massacres against the civilian population, with for example the massive bombing of civilian neighbourhoods in Damascus.²⁸ Same for the Italians in Libya.²⁹ This has to be part of our conscience when talking about violence in the region. Another aspect about violence is that when intercommunal violence appeared in the Ottoman Empire, it was often after Europeans had introduced distortions in local balances. This does not mean that I have an irenist vision of the Ottoman Empire: it was also a society with violent aspects. But this induces me to defy from visions today which are still leaning toward Europe giving lessons. The terrible civilizing mission Europe thought it had in the world, from the moment of the colonization of Algeria (1830) to the moment of the establishment of the mandates of the League of Nations in Syria, Palestine and Irak after World War One was a feature so deeply anchored into the very nature of Europe that it still shapes foreign policies and political attitudes. There

²⁶ See: Harrington (Joel) and Walser Smith (Helmut), Confessionalization, Community and State-Building in Germany (1555-1870), *The Journal of Modern History*, 1997, 69-1, p.77-101.

²⁷ Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison, *Coloniser. Exterminer: sur la guerre et l'état colonial*, Paris 2005.

²⁸ See: Wright (Quincy), *The Bombardment of Damascus*, *The American Journal of International Law*, 1926, 20-2, p.263-280. Also: Laverty Miller (Joyce), *The Syrian Revolt of 1925*, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 1977, 8-4, p.545-563.

²⁹ Eric Salerno, *Genocidio in Libia*, Rome, *Il Manifesto*, 2005, 150p.

are too many political, ideological and historical ambiguities in such postures: they have to be critically discussed and abandoned.