From Styria to Syria: A Return of a Thirty Years' War?

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DAVIDE RAGNOLINI, APR 30 2018

In May 1618, Heinrich Matthias von Thurn, the leader of Bohemian Protestants, and Matthias II, the Holy Roman Emperor, came into conflict. In September 1619 an English ambassador in The Hague, while commenting on the continental political events, predicted that the Bohemian affairs will ignite the entire Christendom (Parker 1997: 47). These events are known as the Thirty Years' War (Sutherland 1992: 588). In September 2013, one year after the first military clashes in Syria, the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammad, Javad Zarif, was admonishing that an eventual United States' attack in Syria would ignite a fire across high and low the Middle East. Over time, other observers added unsettling premonitions about the prospect that this regional war could spiral into World War III. In both cases, two local confrontations have escalated into international conflicts.

The tendency by those involved in the Thirty Years' War to de-humanise their respective enemies was strictly linked to its internationalization, underpinned by a 'holy boldness' attitude in conducting war beyond a shared normative standard (Trim 2010: 291). The extent to which these features could be traced in the comprehensive confrontation among different actors in the Middle East can enable us to make sense of such a rising analogy between two so distant, in time and space, conflicts.

A Fortunate Analogy for a Dramatic War

The dramatic deepening process of the sabre-rattling on Syria in a *continuum* of widespread diplomatic and military duels led many analysts to refer to a 'Thirty Years' War situation' as a blueprint for representing a geopolitical conundrum involving manifold actors. The Thirty Years' War has been many things; perhaps not even one war. The biggest conflict of the Western history before the two World Wars, that Churchill used to refer to as the 'Second Thirty Years' War', might be described as a tragic superimposition of three wars: an 'imperial civil war' within the Augsburg territories, a 'western war' between Spain and the Netherlands, and a 'Baltic war' fought by Sweden, Denmark and Germany (Gutmann 1988: 753).

Since the early years of struggle in and over Syria, analysts have seen the same modern Thirty Years' War pattern for contemporary upheavals and plots in the Middle East, but for different and even contradictory purposes. Nonetheless, among the present political debates this historical metaphor failed to make it into the political and diplomatic jargon, and is ignored by the public opinion. Quite surprisingly, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the former German Minister for Foreign Affairs and now President of Germany, in a speech that he delivered in a Conference for peace-building in November 2015 stated that 'there are lessons to be learned from the Westphalian Peace of 1648 for today's Middle East'. For a long time in IR theory this event has been deemed as representing 'the majestic portal which leads from the old to the new world' of international system (Gross 1948: 28). The most glaring achievements of this peace reminded by Frank-Walter Steinmeier were curbing the fear of interventionism, seeking peace through concessions and laying major emphasis on diplomacy.

The Syrian War is more than a civil war. Semantically, on the very concept of a "civil war" the image of past intestine conflicts looms large, thus representing the "inconvenient ancestor" of contemporary "revolutions" (Armitage 2017: 125). At the same time, geopolitically, the majority of analysts have recognized that the very existence of rebel groups was largely dependent on international support. As Martin Zapfe noticed in a report for the Swiss-based 'Center for Security Studies', the conflict has been 'by principle internationalized'.

It is a kind of an open secret in military theory and practice of warfare that a State will lower the costs of invading its enemy by making alliances with subgroups, mercenaries and hostile civil coalitions in the target state. This sort of pre-Westphalian conduct in military strategy was not extinguished with the affirmation of Westphalian code of war between dueling state peers, but rather it proved to be a central feature of contemporary turmoil in the so called 'Syraq' region. Thus, what at first glance appeared as a classic top/bottom conflict to topple a tyrannical government, it eventually turned out to be a part of a wider strategic and logistical effort in order to succeed in a more or less covered international operation of 'regime change'. The modern Thirty Years' War in Europe was, for all intents and purposes, a struggle over power in Central Europe under the camouflage of an imperial constitutional conflict. Does the demise of the heated 'Arab Spring Rhetoric' allow being seen, in part, as a colder interests' calculation relying on a long term geopolitical arm-wrestling between competitive regional powers?

Geopolitical struggle, non-state actors, transnational alliances among coreligionists, and an overarching pressure on the existing State borders equilibrium are common features of both the Bohemian and the middle-eastern war raging from Yemen to 'Syraq'. At the dawn of the 17th century some important signals of the forthcoming war in Europe appeared. The ideological clash between a rising Palatinate 'action party' led by Christian of Anhalt and Frederick V on the Protestant side, and the concerted Viennese Court plots and Count-reformer aspirations of Ferdinand of Styria – crowned Bohemian king in June 1617, Hungarian king in 1618, and finally Emperor in August 1919 – sparked a political and religious conflict in Europe which was endorsed by opposite coreligionists and their respective historical allies. Its original epicenter was the Austrian region of Styria, transformed in a kind of 'confessional laboratory' to realize a forcible conversion of the country by means of a progressive eradication of Protestant churches and the suppression of the legal protections established by Rudolf II in 1609.

Shia Muslims communities on one side and Sunni leaders and population on the other face a long cultural and political intra-Muslim confrontation that broadly follows the structure of a divided Christendom during the early age period. In a 2014 interview Zbigniew Brzezinski affirmed that there are 'some parallels between what's happening in the Middle East to what happened in Europe during the Thirty Years' War'. For the ex-CIA director Leon Panetta, the complex framework of the regional instability covering an area from Somalia to Iraq is something that calls to mind a 'kind of a 30-year war'.

Without hesitation, Martin Van Creveld maintained that 'the similarities [of the Thirty Years' War] with the current war in Syria are obvious and chilling'. Jack Miles went on saying that the spectacularization of IS's victims death is not so different from 'the spectacle that the Calvinists (Puritans) of Britain mounted for the edification of their country when they beheaded the Anglican King Charles I in 1649', in a period in which Great Britain lost, proportionately, more people than 'the two islands would lose in World War I' (Miles 2015: 53).

Who is Who?

Analysts employ this historical analogy see eye to eye on these dramatic war symmetries, but any attempt to provide a shared analysis of 'Who's who' in this Thirty Years' war applicable to its contemporary Muslim version is something difficult to agree upon. To begin with, where is 'Styria' in Middle East today, and who is playing the part of Ferdinand of Styria? One of the most common answers in these 'renewed Thirty Years' War debate' seems to leave no room for doubt: the Shiite Alawite regime of Bashar al-Assad stands for the authoritarian government of Ferdinand of Syria engaged in the persecution of its inhabitants, unwilling to accept a 'democratic change' endorsed by Sunni groups backed by Saudi Arabia and Turkey. For some authors Shia Muslims would regard Sunni faith 'as heresy and abomination', so facing the 'new wave of aggressive Wahhabi/Salafi jihadism' as consequent reaction and political backlash. But this interpretation raises more questions than answers.

First of all, Alawism, represents a minority branch of Shia Islam based in Syria and its role is traditionally backed by all the minorities of the country, from the Syriac Orthodox Church members to the Chaldean Catholic Church. This pattern of political-religious settlement has worked for a long time as a political equalizer in the Syrian society; however, it was called into question a few years ago, and was condemned with increasing force by an international Salafi-Sunni radical movement; to the extent that some threatening 'fatwas' against 'false Muslims' have been issued over the time. It is true that both Iran and Saudi Arabia regarded themselves as the legitimate leader of Islam as a

whole. Despite this, some authors assume that only Iran has to be seen as the new regional hegemonic power, and Syria as its satellite 'menacing' the existence of a Sunni community, thus suggesting that Shia Muslims should 'accept Saudi Arabia's *de facto* guardianship of the holy places of Medina and Mecca'. But did Iran ever claim a right to control these holy places within the Muslim *Ummah*? There is little evidence to confirm this.

Strictly linked to this point is the current evaluation of Iran as a hegemonic actor in the Middle East. According to some observers, Iran already possesses 'a sphere of influence which includes parts of Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen' and is 'attempting to further enlarge their sphere, most notably in the Shi'a-majority Bahrain and Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province'. So we would have an expansionist actor who, quite tellingly, at first endorsed a quietist position on the 'Syria-Styria' region, condemning the wave of violent anti-government rallies and warning of the peril of external interferences.

A common feature of the different 'Thirty Tears' War analogy' versions, indeed, is that this conflict has been 'fueled by neighboring rulers seeking to defend their interests and increase their influence'. According to an analyst 'the wars of religion fought in Europe between 1524 and 1648, of which the Thirty Years' War was the final ghastly chapter, should be seen as an entree into what is happening in the Middle East'. If we are already witnessing this revived tragedy, we would ask, again, who are the geopolitical revisionists, or, to borrow an expression dear to Martin Wight, the 'revolutionists' actors in this Middle East context?

For Van Creveld Iran took the cynical role of a Richelieu 'watching the entire vast area from the Persian Gulf to Latakia on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean turn into a maelstrom of conflicting interests they can play with'. Exporting a Shiite revolution in other Sunni State targets is not the main foreign political goal of Tehran, since it has been engaged in the effort to defend its coreligionists from Lebanon to Yemen, preventing any disadvantageous balance of power. It is a strange assessment in the light of foreign non-State actors involved on the ground. Both Sunni and Shiite militias, in fact, partake in an asymmetrical confrontation.

According to one of the most important pre-Westphalian 'international law textbook' of the period, Grotius's*De iure belli et pacis* published in 1625, the types of war acknowledged until then were public wars, private wars, and finally mixed wars among them (Grotius I, III: 55). This may suggest that a kind of pre-Westphalian disorder is taking over the contemporary Middle Eastern region, so overturning the legacy of the State-building processes triggered by the post-colonial era, from Iraq to Yemen. The value of a Thirty Years' war analogy here is twofold: it points out to a regional order that at the moment, it either does not exist, or is fighting to stay afloat; and, secondly, helps us to remind the balance of power achieved by middle eastern post-colonial States against external interferences in the past.

Quite predictably, a Sunni upheaval far and wide the Shiite Crescent (Becker 2015) would have transformed the domestic conflict in a regional confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Turkey on one side, which both fear any Iranian influence, and Iran and Iraq on the other. Some would say, 'nothing new under the sun': like Spain from the outset of Bohemian crisis weighs in on the side of its Habsburg client, along with a 'popish' and Jesuit-led diplomatic offensive, the Protestant Sweden tried to counterbalance the Catholic coalition by means of a direct military intervention, committing itself to "just war principles" (*bellum iustum criteria*) with the aim to justify its landing in Northern Germany (Piirimäe 2002).

Are both Russia and Iran engaged in restoring a *status quo ante bellum* in a way that resembles the sovereign rights of the Syrian state, or rather is Moscow trying to challenge the Saudi-US anti-Iranian equilibrium in the region? Taking into account the latter hypothesis, a historical result of the Russian intervention in Syria, 'will be that the US influence over much of the Middle East and its allies is going to be reduced in a way akin to the imperial authority of the Habsburg at the end of the European Thirty Years' War.' But this raises a new question: is the Russian intervention in the Middle East deployed to aid its ancient ex-Soviet partner a 'revolutionist' or 'revisionist' geopolitical move, or is it just a regional counterinsurgency measure taken to save the *status quo*?

At a first glance, the latter would appear more persuasive. This last perspective would cast light on an alleged counter-revolutionary role attached to Moscow and Tehran on Syria affairs, but curiously, it would end up to confer on

the absolute monarchies of the Gulf Cooperation Council a 'revolutionist' role capable of revolutionary actions concerted with Washington.

Like in the European Thirty Years' War, action and reaction are something difficult to disentangle in complex historical processes of such a proportion: Ferdinand's counter-reform plans in Styria and Bohemia were perceived as 'revolutionary' in respect to a precedent constitutional settlement of the precarious confessional balance guaranteed by Peace of Augsburg (1555) and the Letter of Majesty (1609). Frederick's decision to not capitulate in December 1620 after the Imperial ban has been equally perceived as an open challenge towards the Emperor and his (geo)political authority, going further to incite 'a war of religion to effect his restoration' (Pursell 2013: 153).

Despite the opposite suggestion advanced by the eminent historian Peter H. Wilson, who rebuffs the Thirty Years' War parallelism in the Middle East by maintaining that in Europe there was a 'virtual absence in the 17th century of 'holy war' arguments', religion has been a central feature of the ideological and psychological confrontation of that time. Though it may be 'unholy', and even allegorical, the present 'holy war' raging in the Middle East would represent the most prominent echo of a bleeding Western past within the European arena.

A 'Westphalia 2.0' for the Middle East (i.e. a new political-territorial settlement for this region) would be possible only through an '*ad hoc* group led by the United States and Russia. Until now, the Geneva talks started in 2012 in Switzerland have failed in satisfying the demands of both sides. During the Thirty Years' War, one of the main reasons of such a long bleeding conflict has been the arduous task to achieve more than a 'negative peace' (the mere absence of war), but rather a '*pax honesta*', that is to say a peace settlement encapsulating agreements honorable and acceptable in the long run for all the actors involved (Kampmann 2010). Not such an easy task to achieve in contemporary Middle East. Pointing out the Syrian conflict, Richard Falk plainly puts it that 'it is hardly an exaggeration to contend that there has never been such a multi-dimensional and hybrid war in all of history' (Falk 2016: 2328).

Even though such an 'Arab Westphalia' has been proven difficult to be achieved, a growing and shared desire to fight terrorism and its international ideological 'brethren', settle new regional order by multilateral agreements, tighten relations with some important regional peace guarantors – as Egypt for Sunni camp and Iran for Shiite one – get rid of the anti-Westphalian logic of 'regime change' by means of a reaffirmed principle of non-intervention, are increasingly perceived as the logical end of this drama.

An Epilogue?

Is the Thirty Years' War a misleading analogy for a far different Oriental, irreducible contest? It seems easy to get rid of any 'Eurocentric' narrative on contemporary Middle East politics; and yet, we should try to cope with this hermeneutic problem by shunning two opposite dead ends. On the one hand there is a well-known Western rhetoric that underpinned the 'Arab Spring' pattern, conveying the idea of an endless struggle all around the world between tin-pot dictators and people engaged in pure revolutionary efforts. This model has always been popular in Western societies and media, between neo-conservatives and 'revolutionists'. On the other hand, the refusal of this pattern had often led to the opposite Orientalist attitude, inducing some analysts, as Seth J. Frantzman, 'to pretend the Middle East doesn't have the same problems as the rest of the world', such as the need for security, stability, peace and prosperous coexistence.

It has been polemically stated that this analogy is abused as a conceptual tool, in order to turn upside down an 'ill-begotten corner of the world' and convert it to a 'Westphalian model' tailor-made for Western political attitudes. But a different, more constructive account of the use of this analogy is possible: the history of human warfare, in fact, may suggest successful solutions to long-standing issues. In IR theory and foreign policy debates, an epistemic challenge to both of these strong opposite orientations – i.e. the Westernist and the radical Orientalist one – could come from a clear-eyed reassessment of our past wars, since predicting our future means remembering our past.

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About the author:

Davide Ragnolini is a Ph.D candidate at the University of Philosophy of Turin (Italy) and currently Ph.D Visiting Fellow at Cardiff School of Law and Politics. He is also a research associate with the "Istituto di Politica" (IdP), and since 2013 he is contributor of the quarterly Italian geopolitical review: "Eurasia. Rivista di studi geopolitici". His research project revolves around the Hobbesian conception on interstate relations, exploring the so called "Hobbesian Tradition" in IR and focusing on the history of international ideas and early modern European history. You can follow his Academia profile here.