

Scotland on the Euphrates

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TWO COUNTRIES COMPETED this week for first place in news programs all over the world: Scotland and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

There could not be a greater difference than between these two countries. Scotland is damp and cold, Iraq is hot and dry. Scotland is called after its whisky (or the other way round), while for ISIS fighters, drinking alcohol is the mark of unbelievers, who should lose their head (literally).

However, there is one common denominator of both crises: they mark the approaching demise of the nation-state.

MODERN NATIONALISM, like any great idea in history, was born out of a new set of circumstances: economic, military, spiritual and others, which made older forms obsolete.

By the end of the 17th century, existing states could no longer cope with new demands. Small states were doomed. The economy demanded a safe domestic market large enough for the development of modern industries. New mass armies needed a base strong enough to provide soldiers and pay for modern arms. New ideologies created new identities.

Britanny and Corsica could not exist as independent entities. They had to give up much of their separate identity and join the large and powerful French state to survive. The United Kingdom, the union of the British isles under a Scottish king, became a world power. Others followed, each at its own pace. Zionism was a late effort to imitate this.

The process reached its peak at the end of World War I, when empires like the Ottoman Caliphate and Austria-Hungary broke up. Kemal Atatürk, who exchanged the Islamic caliphate for a Turkish national state, was perhaps the last great ideologue of the national idea.

But by that time, this idea was already growing old. The realities which had created it were changing rapidly. If I am not mistaken, it was Gustave Le Bon, the French psychologist, who asserted a hundred years ago that every new idea is already obsolete by the time it is adopted by the masses.

The process works like this: somebody conceives the idea. It takes a generation for it to become accepted by the intellectuals. It takes another generation for the intellectuals to teach the masses. By the time it attains power, the circumstances that gave it birth have already changed, and a new idea is required.

Reality changes much more quickly than the human mind.

Take the idea of the European nation-state. When it reached its final victory, after the Great War, the world had already changed. European armies, which had mown each other down with machine guns, were facing tanks and warplanes. The economy became world-wide. Air travel abolished distances. Modern communication created a “world village”.

In 1926 an Austrian nobleman, Richard Coudenhove-

Kalergi, convened a pan-European congress. While Adolf Hitler, a hopelessly old-fashioned thinker, tried to impose the German nation-state on the continent, a small group of idealists propagated the idea of a European Union, which spread after another dreadful World War.

This idea, now still in its infancy, is generally accepted, but it is already obsolete. The multinational economy, the social media, the fight against deadly diseases, the civil wars and genocides, the environmental dangers threatening the entire planet—all these make world governance imperative and urgent—yet this is an idea whose realization is still very, very far away.

THE OBSOLENCE of the nation-state has given birth to a paradoxical by-product: the breakup of the state into smaller and smaller units.

While the world trend towards larger and larger political and economic units gathers strength, nation-states fall apart. All over the world, small peoples are demanding independence.

This is not quite as ridiculous as it looks. The nation-state came into being because realities needed societies of at least a certain size and strength. But by now, all the major functions of the states are moving towards much larger regional unions. So why does Corsica need France? Why do the Basques need Spain? Why does Quebec need Canada? Why not live in a smaller state with people like you, who speak your natural language?

Czechoslovakia has broken up, peacefully. So has Yugoslavia, not so peacefully. So have Cyprus, Serbia, Sudan—and the Soviet Union, of course.¹

The Scottish referendum is one of the opening scenes of this new epoch. The proponents of independence promised that Scotland could join the European Union and NATO, perhaps adopt the Euro. So why, they ask, should Scotland remain in the British straightjacket? After all, Britannia does not rule the waves anymore!

The failure of the vote for Scottish independence does not change the course of events. It just slows it down.

NATIONALISM WAS a European idea.

It never struck deep roots in the arid fields of the Arab world. Even in the heyday of Arab nationalism, it was never quite clear whether a Damascene, for example, considered himself first a Syrian or a Muslim, whether a Beirutite considered himself first a Maronite-Christian or a Lebanese, or whether a Cairene was first an Egyptian, an Arab or a Muslim.

During the Algerian struggle for independence, an angry French right-wing politician once complained to me: “Before we conquered North Africa, Algeria was never united! We created the Algerian nation!” He was quite right, though he drew the wrong conclusions. Many times I heard exactly the same

¹Let me remark in passing that this also concerns the idea of the so-called One-State solution for our little problem in Israel/Palestine. During the last three generations, the world has not seen a single instance of two different peoples coming together voluntarily in one state.

from dedicated Zionists about the Palestinian nation.

The modern Arab nations were invented by European colonialists. Lately, it has become a fashion to mention Mark Sykes and Georges Picot, two mediocre bureaucrats, one British, one French, who drew up a secret agreement for the division of the Ottoman Empire. They and their successors created the states of Syria, Iraq, (Trans)Jordan, Palestine etc.

These “nation-states” were quite artificial. The European planners had generally very little understanding for local circumstances, traditions, identities and culture. Neither did they care very much. Iraq, with its different components, was created to accommodate British interests. The strange eastern borders of Jordan were shaped for a British oil pipeline from Mosul to Haifa. Lebanon, created as a home for the Christians, was shaped to include Muslim Sunnite and Shiite areas, just to make it larger. Al-Sham was stripped of Jordan, Palestine and Lebanon and became Syria. Later it also lost Alexandretta to Turkey.

ALL THESE imperialist manipulations ran counter to Muslim history and tradition.

Every Muslim child learns in school about the vast Muslim empires, stretching from the north of Spain to the borders of Burma, from the gates of Vienna to the South of Yemen, and then has to look at the map of mini-countries like Jordan and Lebanon. It's humiliating.

First there were efforts to unify the Arabs under the umbrella of nationalism. The Ba'ath party strove (in theory, at least) to create one, single pan-Arab state, and the creed was taken up by the hero of the masses, the Egyptian Gamal Abd-al-Nasser, a secular military dictator. A pan-Arab state could also have created some equality between rich oil-states like Saudi Arabia and poor countries like Egypt.

Nasserism created a new ideology. Pan-Arab nationalism was “kaumi”. Local patriotism was “wotani”. The community of all Muslims was the “umma”.

(The same word, umma, means the opposite in Hebrew: a modern nation. Israelis are as mixed up as their neighbors. We have to choose our priority. Are we primarily Jews, Hebrews or Israelis? What exactly does “the Nation-State of the Jewish People”, as propagated by Binyamin Netanyahu, mean?)

THE HUGE attraction of the movement now called “Islamic State” is that it proposes a simple idea: do away with all

these crazy borders drawn up by Western imperialists for their own purposes and re-create the classic pan-Muslim state: the Caliphate.

This seems like the opposite of the breakup of European states, but it means the same: the total rejection of the nation-state.

As such, it belongs both to the past and to the future.

It glorifies the past. Muhammad and his immediate successors (caliph means successor) are idealized as immaculate persons, the embodiment of all virtues, the possessors of divine wisdom.

This is very far from historical truth. All three immediate successors of the prophet were assassinated. Because of quarrels about the succession, Islam split into Sunnis and Shiites and remains so to this very day (now more than ever). But myth is stronger than truth.

However, while clinging to the past, the Islamic State movement (former ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham) is very modern. With one swipe it clears the table of the nation-state and its derivatives. It carries a clear, simple idea, easily understood by Muslims everywhere. It seems to be vastly convincing.

THE WESTERN response is almost comically inadequate.

People like Barack Obama and John Kerry, and their equivalents all over Europe, are quite unable to understand what it is all about. With the traditional European contempt for the “natives”, they see nothing but head-cutting terrorists. They really seem to believe that they can vanquish a revolutionary new idea by forming a coalition with Arab dictators and corrupt politicians, bombing the rebels and finishing the job by employing local mercenaries.

That is a ludicrous misreading of the new reality. By now, IS, with just a handful of fanatical and cruel militants, has conquered huge territories.

WHAT IS the answer?

Frankly, I don't know. But the first step for Westerners, as well as for Israelis, is to discard their arrogance and try to understand the new phenomenon they are facing.

They are not facing “terrorists”—the magic word that seems to solve all problems without the need to strain the brain. They are facing a new phenomenon.

History is in the making.