_____

The Eastern Meditterenean's role as a bridgehead between Africa, Europe and Asia has led it to be the geographic focal point of many of the world's most seminal civilizations and empires, from the Phoenicians and Ancient Greeks to the Arab and Ottoman Empires, all the way to the British and Americans, who invested significant resources in its control. Throughout history, this eastern half of the Mediterranean has had certain traits which have defined it, just as much in antiquity as in the present day. It has always functioned as a veritable spider's web, causing movements and events in any part of it to reverberate across the whole of its vast expanse. Furthermore, it has been synonymous with autocracy, despotism, war, conflict and heterogeny. It is this constellation of traits, coupled with its tremendous strategic importance which make the East Med not only one of the world's most significant areas of attention and study, but also one of the most enigmatic, with its strategic nuance matched only by its volatility and instability. For this reason, we have set out to make a categorical introductory analysis of the region, the countries which constitute it and the way that they all affect oner another, its salient characteristics and what groups reside within its boundaries and how they forge common identities and alliances.

The Focus Area

The East Med is not simply a geographic abstraction, but rather a specific geostrategic space that functions like a geopolitical arena, funneling the ambitions and affecting the security of the states and groups it includes in such a manner that none of its countries are immune to aftershocks from developments. Although geographically connected, the region varies in interconnectivity with all its constituent areas. In simple terms, a country belongs geographically and politically in the Eastern Mediterranean when its political fate, prosperity and security is inextricably linked with those of all the other countries of the region. The Eastern Mediterranean (E.M), overlaps partly with the Middle East forming a distinct area traditionally known as the Near East or the Levant. The EastMed is an area which is first and foremost defined by its heterogeny, ethnically, religiously and politically. However, the matter of whether exactly groups develop what Gramsci termed as ''historical blocs'' around a common sense of EastMed or Levantine identity is a hotly debated issue. Unfortunately, the prevailing theory on identity formulation in the region is the trans-national dualistic one-dimensional grouping based exclusively on religious and ethnic affiliation commonly known as ''Sectarianism''.

Low Geopolitics versus Sectarianism

In the analysis of ethno-religious conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean, the theory of sectarianism has emerged both in popular discourse and academia alike to reduce all nuanced analysis to little more than orientalist simplification. This theory holds that the myriad religious groups in the Middle East are completely incapable of overcoming their cleavages, fanatically unwilling to cooperate with their "mortal sectarian enemies", particularly in the case of Shi'a and Sunni Muslims, but also the Christians and the Jews, and generally behaving according to a zero-sum logic. In the eyes of its proponents, sectarian disputes acquire an almost transhistorical inevitability, being a staple of the region's past, ever-present in the modern day, and destined to continue into the future. This theory of sectarianism is very frequently compared to European wars of religion of the 16th century, in an attempt to lend the theory some historical credence by attempting to show that similar sociological patterns are present in other regions and periods of time.

This theory serves a practical purpose, saving people's precious time from delving into the nuances behind identity mobilization in the region, namely as a means of

abrogating responsibility for the current bedlam in the region from local and extra-regional actors, as well as eliminating the question of what can be done or change to establish lasting stability in the region, by elevating the problems that led to the region's chaotic state to the status of unavoidable primordial products or solely to malign foreign interventions. The project focuses instead on the endogenous structural conditions and local actor-related drives. One the one hand, the region's contemporary geopolitical configuration, largely the result of western geopolitical diktats on the drawing of borders in the creation of states, failed to reflect the ethnic topography by dividing large chunks of ethnic and religious kin groups across different states. Also, the emergence of dissatisfied and insecure overlapping ethno-territorial majorities and minorities across states has given the rise to security and autonomy concerns of community groups that were met with suspicion and the formation of dominant-subordinate patterns. Arbitrary decisions with concern to geopolitical balancing, and the ensuing formulation of competitive security interests by local state and non-state actors, have ultimately transformed the region's inherent diversity into an antagonizing legacy of sectarianism and division. Competitive patterns, ownership and belonging, and fear of subordination reflect on hyper-militarization, autocratic political culture, humanitarian crises, ceaseless high-casualty conflict and inter-group discord, as responses to the region's faulty geopolitical configuration. The region's arbitrary border delimitation and the following dysfunctional state-building processes have altogether ignored the principle of inclusivity, homogeneity and cohesion, focusing rather on the practices of autocracy and domination as ruling norms. Instead of devising a long-lasting remedy to former imperial subjugation [Ottoman, Arab, British, French], the region's faulty and unorthodox geopolitical architecture has transformed cleavages into divisionary lines of dynamic competition. Hence, it is no surprise that EastMed states are frequently immersed in periodic regime shocks leading to state collapse, thus marking a consistent trend of instability throughout the Eastern Mediterranean.

Yet the absolutist and monolithic view of sectarianism reveals significant limitations when one references the history of the region and the inconsistency of exclusively religious-ethnic identity formation from a high geopolitical perspective, one that ignores the web of interconnections and compartmentalization of the internal regional nexus. Hence the number of controversies spotted under the prescriptions of cross-regional sectarianism. For example, if radical Sunnis and Shi'as are incapable of coexistence, then why do their most valiant representatives agree and support the Palestinian cause [Sunni Arab Muslims]. Why do the Lebanese Shiite Muslims

3

Hezbollah militants support Alevite and Christian minorities in Syria in opposition to local Sunni Muslims? If Sunni Muslims form a single religious kin group across the entire EastMed region, then why do all of the major competing factions in Libya, Egypt and Turkey (GNA vs LNA and Kemalists vs Islamists respectively), - who consist entirely of nominal Sunnis, unify to pursue their collective ''Sunni interests''? What makes Arab nationals unite or divide over particular issues?

There is no shortage of such counterarguments against monolithic sectarianism. In reality, we see that identity groups and subsequent identity mobilization in the region is a fluid affair which is fundamentally both inter-sectional and heavily contingent on the local demographic and political context of the specific country in question, as pointed out very adroitly by Danny Postel and Nader Hashemi in their seminal work on the matter ''*Sectarianization*''. As Hashemi and Postel show, far from Sunni, Shias, Christians and other groups forming monolithic interest groups that render national borders little more than a formality, each individual country in the region functions as its own self-contained environment for identity formulation, with the unifying ''we'' being contingent on whatever the local comparative ''they'' happens to be in that country, with ethnicity and political affiliation playing equally prominent roles to religion in the constitution of the defining characteristics of that local self-contained ''we''.

In Israel for example, the existence of the unifying threat of the Jewish Israelis eliminates denominational distinctions between Muslims in the country, and the common identity is instead formed around a common ''Palestinian Arab Muslim'' identity. As one exits Israel however, and looks at the adjacent areas of the Palestinian Authority, the Gaza strip and Lebanon, we see that there is a lack of common Muslim identity as one exists in the Israeli demographic context, and the common Palestinian character of Hamas and the PLO does not function as unifier between them in the slightest, with the two groups arguably being completely divorced from one another, even in the face of the common Israeli foe. Likewise in Syria, we saw a mutually beneficial, albeit turbulent, multi-ethnic coordinated front against the fundamentalist Sunni Islamic State during the course of the Syrian civil war, wherein Sunni Kurds, Sunni Arab and Christians all were co-belligerents against the ISIS Sunnis. We see here that there is no common identity between ISIS and the rest of the Sunnis in Syria, or for that matter with any of the other multitude of predominantly Sunni militant groups that constitute the Syrian Democratic Forces, who are unified almost exclusively by their common opposition to the equally Sunni SNA.

This shows us that there is also an element of political instrumentalism to identity formulation in the region, wherein political realities and common interests link together to unify otherwise disparate groups (The Syrian government makes extensive use of imagery that evokes Christian-Muslim unity in the face of fundamentalist Muslims militants and political enemies of the Syrian state alike). Many countries actively use this strategy to mend internal rifts, as Israel has successfully ameliorated much of the tension between its Ahskenazi and Mizrahi Jewish sub groups over unequal political and economic control over the country by emphasizing their common ''Jewishness'' in the face of the ''Palestinian Other''. If not for the presence of that common enemy, the radically differing political and religious tendencies of the Mizrahi coupled with their perception of the Ashkenazi dominance over all Israeli life may very well have led to inter-Jewish conflict of one form or another.

We also see that concepts of identity are not necessarily reciprocative either: We see a wealth of evidence to suggest that different groups draw the lines of their common interest differently, with one side embracing another group as an ally while that very same group does not return the favor. The best example of this is likely Lebanon, wherein despite the Hezbollah regime acting as the guardian of the country's Christian population, said Christians have an extensive history of supporting Israeli aggression towards Muslims in Lebanon, as during 1978 and 1982 Israeli invasion of the country, with the most haunting example being the Sabra and Shatila massacres carried out by Christian Lebanese militias against Palestinian Muslims under the approving auspices of the IDF.

Finally, these composite identity and interest groupings are by no means static, even in the same national context, but are subject to change in tandem with the evolving political subtext of the country, with yesterday's ally becoming tomorrow's enemy, before reverting right back. Syria is the best example of this, where the diving lines of the ongoing civil war are nothing if not blurry, with SNA, FSA, Kurdish militias, SDF and the countless independent armed groups all practically engaged in a never-ending reshuffling of alliances that have no permanence whatsoever.

List of Relevant Sources

Ian Black, Enemies and Neighbors Arabs and Jews in Palestine and Israel, 1917-2017 (2017, Atlantic Monthly Press)

Michael Bonine, Is There a Middle East? The Evolution of a Geopolitical Concept, [2011, Stanford University Press]

Emma Lundgren Jörum, Beyond Syria's Borders A History of Territorial Disputes in the Middle East [2017, IB Tauris]

Adham Saouli, Unfulfilled Aspirations Middle Power Politics in the Middle East. (2020, Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd)

Christopher Phillips, The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East (2018, Yale University Press)

Marc Lynch, The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East (2017, Public Affairs)

Raymond Hinnebusch, The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising Routledge/ St. Andrews Syrian Studies Series (2019 Routledge; 1st edition)

Charles Lister, The Syrian Jihad: The Evolution of an Insurgency (2017, Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd)

Ariel I. Ahram, War and Conflict in the Middle East and North Africa. (2020 Polity; 1st edition)

Thomas L. Friedman, From Beirut to Jerusalem, (2012 Picador USA)

Andrew Arsan, Lebanon: A Country in Fragments, (2020 C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd)

Simon Mabon, Houses Built on Sand: Violence, Sectarianism and Revolution in the Middle East, (2021 Manchester University Press)

Yannis A. Stivachtis, Conflict and Diplomacy in the Middle East: External Actors and Regional Rivalries (2018 E-International Relations)

Adham Saouli, Unfulfilled Aspirations: Middle Power Politics in the Middle East (2020 Oxford University Press)

Suzi Mirgani, Informal Politics in the Middle East (2021 C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd)

Monica Duffy Toft, The Geography of Ethnic Violence: Identity, Interests, and the Indivisibility of Territory (2003 Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press)

Aurélie Daher, Hezbollah: Mobilization and Power, (2019 Oxford University Press; 1st edition)

Sources in Greek

Ιωάννης Θ. Μάζης. Η γεωπολιτική της ευρύτερης μέσης Ανατολής και η Τουρκία 2008, Εκδοτικός Οίκος Α. Α. Λιβάνη

Σωτήρης Σ. Λίβας.Όψεις της Μέσης Ανατολής, 2017 Παπαζηση

Ανδρέας Στεργίου. Σύγκρουση και ευημερία, 2019 Κλειδάριθμος

Ιωάννης Μάζης. Νεορεαλιστική προσέγγιση θεωρίας διεθνών σχέσεων και συστημική γεωπολιτική ανάλυση, 2019 ΛΕΙΜΩΝ

Ιωάννης Μάζης. Γεωπολιτική και γεωστρατηγικές τής συριακής κρίσεως, 2016 ΛΕΙΜΩΝ