

Gatineau Monde lecture series

The Middle East in Transition


TOUJOURS AMDUR
A view from Val des Monts

Don't classify the Cold War as ancient history quite yet. According to political science professor emeritus at Concordia University, Henri Habib, the struggle in Syria is now a proxy battle between the United States and Russia. Professor Habib addressed a September 30 Gatineau Monde audience at the Maison du Citoyen on the topic "The Middle East in Transition."

He began by first discussing the importance of the Middle East in terms of its geopolitics, which is the intersection of Africa, Asia, and Europe. Napoleon invaded Egypt as a way of outflanking Britain. Hitler and Napoleon both saw a thrust in North Africa as a way to get around the problem of attacking an island nation.

Then there is the cultural aspect. The Middle East is central to the three Abrahamic faiths, all of which have a claim on Jerusalem. Even for those who do not practice a religion, the Middle East is part of their cultural heritage.

The political dynamics are complex. Professor Habib illustrated the situation with three concentric circles. In the centre, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, marked, for present purposes, with the establishment of Israel in 1948. Next circle was for the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, and the outermost circle was for Obama's 2009 proclamation, in which he extended concerns for the Greater Middle East, from Morocco to Pakistan.

Looking at the religious geography, from east to west,

Habib identified Iran as 90% Shiite, Iraq 60% Shiite, Syria 70% Sunni, and Lebanon 40% Shiite (the largest religious community in the country). Syria is ruled by Assad, an Alawi, whose faith is an offshoot of Shia, and Alawis and other minorities (Christians, Druze, etc.) tend to look to Assad for protection against the majority Sunnis. When Saddam Hussein was eliminated, Shiite clergy urged people to vote for Shiite parties to overcome Sunni dominance, as Hussein was a Sunni and had Sunnis in many positions of authority, though his rule was secular. The power now in the hands of Shiites, largely excluding Sunnis, explains the current crisis in Iraq. "Bush gave Iran a gift by invading Iraq. The country is now an Iranian satellite." Should Assad fall, Shiite Lebanon would be geographically isolated from the other Shiite countries.

The Islamic State (IS) declares itself a caliphate, with its leader thus being a successor to Mohamed. The caliph is like a combination of pope and emperor. Habib likened the streaming of foreign IS volunteers to the situation in Spain from 1936 to 1939.

The IS received aid from both the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, enabling it to rise to its current power. A day after the lecture, the Ottawa Citizen had a front-page article pointing out that some of the very people that Canada—and Western forces more generally—aided in overthrowing Muammar Gadhafi are now part of IS.

Habib turned his attention to some of the main actors in the Middle East. Iran is a powerful nation with a long history of a proud civilization, a Shiite power whose main regional adversary is Sunni Saudi Arabia, a country mainly important for its oil and for its two holy cities, Mecca and Medina. Both countries supply aid to their preferred factions in other countries. Who will win in Syria, Saudi Arabia or Iran? The United States or Russia?

Turkey is mainly Sunni, and in the past its Ottoman Empire controlled the Middle East. It would like to return at least in part to its past glory. Israel is an important military power with massive financial and military assistance from the U.S. Israel, itself a nuclear power, is concerned about Iran's nuclear ambitions. Habib believes that if the Palestinian issue is resolved, there would be room for an Israel-Saudi Arabia alliance against Iran.

Israel shares a precarious border with Shiite Hezbollah-influenced Lebanon. If Syria, on another border, falls to the IS, its situation would be even more strained. Habib believes that the Palestinians made an error in not accepting partition, as Israel took everything in the 1967 war. Habib identifies five main obstacles to a solution to the conflict: Jerusalem, refugees, settlers, boundaries, and security. Former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert was prepared to allow East Jerusalem to be the Palestinian capital, while current Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu is not. Olmert was willing to allow the return of 30,000 refugees, but there are now four million. This concession was not acceptable to the Palestinian Authority.

The settlers (Habib calls them colonists) are a real sticking point. Settler ideology sees as their cause the creation of a Greater Israel, at the expense of the Palestinians, if not of the Jordanians as well. These settlers/colonists would serve as a serious danger to any territorial concessions. Olmert was prepared to accept the 1967 borders with some land swaps. As to security, Olmert suggested either UN or NATO forces in the Jordan Valley.

Netanyahu has added two major wrinkles to the Israeli position: Palestinian recognition of Israel as a Jewish state and Israeli control of the Jordan Valley. Neither of these elements is acceptable to the Palestinian Authority. Recognition of Israel as a Jewish state makes the status of the Palestinian (20% of the Israeli population) problematic. It also serves as an additional barrier to the right to return.

The possibility of resolving the Israel-Palestine conflict thus seems more remote than ever.