The Middle East in 1979

Before the events of 1979, the Middle East had undergone several crises: from Afghanistan, where local resistance had risen up against Amin’s pro-Soviet regime, to Turkey, which had experienced massive sectarian violence. The Arab Middle East, more in particular, presented serious marks of instability: ruled mainly by autonomized “local” states, with their own agendas and considerable freedom for maneuver, it was somehow exempted from the direct control of the two Cold War super powers. As Egypt drew closer to the United States and Soviet influence weakened, the “regional system” of the 1960s-1970s started to crumble. Two “revolutionary Arab leaders” competed to fill the vacuum left by the death of Nasser (1971) and his successor al-Sadat: Saddam Hussein, who would become president of Iraq in 1979, and Hafez al-Assad, who, once his power consolidated domestically, became the main arbiter of the Lebanese Civil War (1975). Both leaders had a great capacity to do harm; however, none of these “revolutionary Arab regimes” enjoyed the moral authority that had characterized Nasserism.

What Happened in 1979?

The events of 1979 occurred in a very unstable environment, sealing a historical cycle in which left-wing ideas had dominated throughout the region. They also constituted historical landmarks in the re-shaping of the modern Middle East: they marked the end of a historical period, proving at the same time that a new one had started. The first the only one directly linked to the region’s instability was the Camp David Agreement with Egypt recognizing Israel, a defection from the Arab “Resistance camp” condemned as the betrayal of the “Arab socialist left”. The second event, the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, entailed a serious blow to the perception of the USSR as a protector of the Middle East against “imperialism”: the discredit of the communist movement was traumatic in almost the entire Middle East. The third event, the Iranian revolution, demonstrated that “Islamists” could be much more radical and successful in their “anti-imperialist” struggle than any left-wingers, offering new horizons to Muslim societies. The revolution dismantled one of the most solid pro-American regimes, and took place while the Middle East was still in the acme of revolutionary urgency: it was hailed by militants and intellectuals as the authentic “Muslim” model of fight leading to independence, justice, and purity. Finally, despite its rather limited regional impact, the uprising of the “new-ikhwan”
movement in Mecca gave a sharply contrasted image of Islamist movements, until then accused of being pro-American. The Mecca uprising showed that Islamists could be radical, posing an important challenge to pro-Western powers in the region. The uprising was suppressed thanks to the advice and logistic support of the French GIGN,\(^3\) the “guardians” of the Two Holy Places of Islam could not re-establish control over the Kabah without the military intervention of a “Christian power”.

The interpretation of these events poses numerous challenges because of the gap between their complex causes and their outcomes. In order to understand the 1978-80 period, one must seize the importance of structural dynamics and dynamics of change in each country, and understand the outcomes. Domestic, timely and spatially localized internal dynamics characterized the period leading to 1979: long-lasting crises in Egypt, divisions within the Afghan Communist Party, processes of radicalization among the dissident students of theological faculties in Saudi Arabia, and the amplification of left-wing protests in Iran. Extensive quantitative and qualitative data explain why, at one point, the ongoing crises in these different areas led to a radical change in foreign policy (Egypt), to the invasion by a protector-power (Afghanistan), to a revolutionary configuration (Iran), or to the eruption of a violent uprising (Saudi Arabia). These timely and spatially situated events seem at first disconnected: the Camp David Agreement does not explain why the Kremlin decided to invade Afghanistan to overthrow a friendly regime. The Iranian Revolution started as a left-wing struggle before becoming "Islamist" as a consequence of the participation of the bazaari and the clergy, and had nothing to do with the uprising in Mecca. The fact that these events took place in one single year relates to the internal chronology of each country, and not to any region-wide causal or systemic effect.

However, the existence of an integrated narrative of these events is evident in the post-1979 period, as the Middle East witnessed the heydays of radical contestation: these events, through the meanings assigned to them by state and non-state actors alike, rapidly gained a global sense that transcended them. Four local events became complementary avatars of one single process, demonstrating the change from a historical cycle determined by the left to another determined by Islamism. For instance, an Egyptian militant probably ignored the very existence of Afghanistan until 1978, but later explained his own struggle through a narrative originated from Afghanistan, eventually becoming a **mujahid** of the Afghan Jihad.

To a certain extent, 1979 lasted way beyond one chronological year thanks to the dynamics it unleashed, demonstrating the emergence of an integrative narrative linking local events to regional history. It also provoked a process of deeper integration within the Middle East itself. If this vague geopolitical concept included only a few countries in the 1970s, it undeniably comprised Afghanistan in the 1980s and Algeria in the 1990s. One cannot understand the Iran-Iraq War, the first Afghan War, the evolution of the Lebanese Civil War, the Islamist uprisings in Egypt or the Algerian Civil War of the 1990s without considering the combined effects of all these four events of 1979. They exceed the simple diffusion of Islamist ideology in the Muslim world. The radicalization and further militarization of the Shi'a struggle in Lebanon was a direct

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\(^3\) Groupe d'intervention de la gendarmerie nationale.
consequence of the Iranian revolution. Such radicalization had a transformative effect going beyond the affiliation of Hezbollah to the doctrine of the veelayet-e faqih ("Government of the [Religious] Experts"). Throughout this process of integration, many important Islamist personalities and future central figures of al-Qaïda were among the many “Arab Afghans” who joined the Jihad against the USSR.

The weakening of left-wing movements after 1979 equally explains the emergence of a new integrated Middle-Eastern narrative. There is no doubt that even after 1979, some left-wing “islands” had survived in the Middle East. However, the left, while being a region-wide movement, had a universal, “Tri-Continental” horizon beyond the Middle East: it allowed for a broader, supra-Arab and supra-Middle-Eastern imaginary, linking the struggle of “Middle-Eastern peoples” to that of other “oppressed peoples” in imperialist countries. Its political vocabulary, as well as its symbols, were universal.

The left-wing movement in the Middle East was at once heir to and contester of Westernization: its struggle was universalistic, as its idealized alliance of oppressed peoples and classes from the “imperialist West” would lead to the suppression of the master-and-slave dialectic, creating the conditions for universal emancipation. While not ignoring the existence of the West as a “model”, the Islamist movement reduced its universal horizon to the sole Muslim world, and redefined the relations with the West through the confrontation between the dar al-Islam and the dar al-harb. The issue of alienation was also redefined: the West, incarnation of the jahiliyya (pre-prophetic “ignorance”), was henceforth considered as the main source of the alienation of Muslims to their own values. Moreover, the Islamist time perception was different from that of the left: it, too, considered the present-time of the world as synonymous of corruption and oppression, but saw its ultimate reference in a model of the past (the asr-i Sāda – the prophetic “Age of Happiness”), portraying the future as the eschatological emancipation promised by the Koran. With this shift from the Tri-Continental to the “Muslim world”, Islamism found its references and its axiological horizons exclusively within a radicalized Islam. The contrast between the positive subjectivity of the 1960s-1970s left-wing movements and the dark subjectivity of the Islamist movements of the 1980s is evident. The dichotomy of dar al-Islam and dar al-harb radicalized Islamist movements through a variety of sacralized resources and symbols, portraying a powerful taghuti (“polytheist”/“oppressive”) world-system to fight. Al-Zawahiri, future figure of al-Qaïda, stated, as he, an Arab fighter, fought in Afghanistan: “We are accepting American help in order to fight against the Russians; still [we should not forget that], the Americans constitute the main evil”.

1979 and Status of Historical Events
Beside their local importance and global impact, these events challenge the concept of historical events. All meaningful happenings leave some traces to posterity, and are considered as events worth taking into consideration. A historical event provokes some kind of radical rupture in a given process, allowing at the same time for an interpretation of the past based on the meaning offered by such discontinuity. Similarly, a historical event has the capacity to create

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an entirely new projection for the future, defining the past and the future according to the meaning imposed by the present time. A historical event can potentially lead to a new philosophy of history, offering an integrated narrative of the past and a new teleological roadmap: the past thus becomes the time-framework marked by the accidents diverting history from its course.

The capacity of events to provide a new philosophy of history poses additional challenges. Historical events do lead to conflicting and contradictory interpretations: debates on the different understandings of the Iranian revolution, or of the Kremlin’s motives to invade Afghanistan, overflow. However, when these events took place, they imposed the tyranny of the interpretable frameworks elaborated in their present time upon the actors and observers: the teleological meanings produced were largely accepted as the only meaningful ones, explaining not only the present but also the past and the future.

With the notable exception of the siege of Mecca, the events of 1979 are historical because they have changed the nature of power (Iran), provoked either the beginning of a massive unrest with long-lasting de-regulatory effects (Afghanistan), or pacified relations between two major protagonists of a thirty-year long conflict (Egypt). They have also changed regional history and the meaning given to this history. Through their outcomes, the states’ monopoly of organized violence and their control on borders have weakened. The unprecedentedly unleashed dynamics have allowed for a huge military transhumance throughout the 1980s. Beside the 30,000-35,000 young Arabs reaching Pakistan and Afghanistan, many other uncountable “men with guns” (included women) commuted between Turkish Kurdistan and Lebanon, Iraq and Iran, Iran and Afghanistan. Local conflicts such as the Shi’a struggle in Iraq did exist before 1979, but without the radical region-wide instability of 1979 they would never have assumed an amplified dimension. The events of 1979 have changed the basic coordinates of political axiology in the Arab world. The Arab elites, having looked at Europe for more than a century to produce their own political roadmaps, have then turned towards two non-Arab Muslim countries: Iran and Afghanistan. Arab radical Islamists, such as Sayyid Qotb, were reinterpreted through these two external trajectories. Conquest of power by insurrection or war provided Islamism with strong references and revolutionary romanticism, encouraging its transformation as dominant political syntax.

Islamism was not only the name of a political, social and cultural struggle, or a new form of militancy: it was also a philosophy of history in which “believers” found convictions, sense of comradeship (or rather “brotherhood”), and prospects of future emancipation through struggle and victory. It also had a pretention to authenticity: as al-Zawahri explained, thanks to the Afghan Jihad, for the first time a war had been conducted in the name of Islam, and Islam only.5

Changes in the Political Language

Three decades after the events of 1979, Islamism has dramatically changed the very understanding of the world in the Middle East. Before 1979, a more or less common political vocabulary existed in the region. Despite the plurality of political dialects, this vocabulary was able to reproduce itself

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through the effects of diffusion, from Morocco to Afghanistan, and through intergenerational transmissions. By 1979, the “brothers” and “sisters” had replaced the “comrades”, and would use an entirely different vocabulary, mentioning Islamic authenticity, Jihad and unity of the dar-al-islam (“the House of Islam”) against the dar-al-harb (“the House of War”). These concepts, earlier considered anachronistic even among the ulama, now imposed themselves as the key concepts for the understanding of the world. Old symbolisms had left room for the mujahid (“Combatant of Jihad”), and shehid (“Martyr”). Nationalist and left-wing movements had already used these notions in the past for the sacralization of non-religious struggles, but Islamist axiology enabled militants to give an entirely renewed sense to these words. Islamist military praxis led to the total loss of the polysemical meaning which had previously characterized these terms. Through the fusion between ideology and praxis, the hermeneutical approach, once central even in the work of Islamist thinkers such as Seyyid Qotb or the Islamo-marxist Shariati, disappeared.

Change also affected other registers of political language, i.e. that of the political meaning of the body. Political activism in the region had earlier been incarnated by two bodies: Nasser and Arafat. They symbolized new and virile dynamism, destroyer of the order of old corrupted bodies and projecting a re-unified national future. In contrast, the imaginary of 1979 was obsessed with two old bodies: the ghost of Seyyid Qotb, aged 60 when executed in 1966, and the living body of Khomeini, aged almost 80 at the beginning of the Iranian revolution. Qotb’s post-mortem revival attested the cowardice of the regime responsible for his execution; Khomeini’s body was the living proof of authenticity, refusal to capitulate and resistance. He incarnated all the martyrs, Iranians or Muslims alike. The sacrifice of the youth was not only a way of honoring these figures, but also of defending the values of resistance they embodied.

30 Years Later

In my book on Middle-Eastern political sociology6 I argued that the region went through three historical cycles: 1979/1989-1990, 1991-2001, and 2001-?. This classification could be challenged by considering the three decades as one single cycle started in 1979: except for Iran, where the monarchy was overthrown in 1979, the authoritarian regimes were solid enough to adapt to the new conditions and survive;7 Islamism dominated almost uninterruptedly as political syntax, dissidence and axiology throughout these decades.

As I write these lines in May 2011, the region finds itself in an unpredictable condition, marked by popular uprisings, disappearance of rais, massive repression in Syria, and civil war scenarios in Yemen and Libya. It seems evident that 2011 has been the most important year in the Middle East since 1979 so far: the direct or indirect impact of the 1979 events will be felt in many ways in the near future. The year 1979 has finally become “historical”, in the sense that it now belongs to the past. For better or for worse, the new Middle East will be built on new dynamics we are not yet able to read, or predict.

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