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The Mythological Machine in the Great Civil War (2001–2021): *Oikos* and *Polis* in Nation-Making

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ABSTRACT: *The article revisits 'sectarianism' as an epistemic venue within the context of a Great Civil War in the Middle East (2001-2021), a label that includes the overarching narratives of political life in the aftermath of 9/11 up to the aftermath of the so-called 'Arab Spring.' By introducing the notion of the 'mythological machine,' it argues that 'sectarianism' is a myth, something that does not exist in real terms, but which has real world effects. The mythological machine is a device that produces epiphanies and myths; it is a gnoseological process, which has cultural, social and political effects through the generation of mythological facts and, as a machine, it does so through both guiding and automatized mechanisms. Through this interpretive shift, the article proceeds through several theoretical steps using a variety of cases from across West Asia and North Africa, contextualizing them within global political events. Firstly, the article argues that it is 'civil war,' shaped by the work of the mythological machine that governs state-society relations and transnational politics in the Middle East. Then, the article discusses how the mythological machine incorporates a semantic othering via mythological thinking, speak and practice that shapes the perception and experience of civil wars. To conclude, the article discusses how the mythological machine displaces people's status in the context of civil wars leading to the emergence of new forms of belonging and nation-making. Ultimately, the mythological machine creates what Giorgio Agamben defines as a state without people, a condition exhausting the value of citizenship and the political.*

KEY WORDS: *Arab Spring; Civil war; Counter-revolution; Displacement; Myths; Mythological machine; Revolution; Sectarianism; Social theory; State-society relations*

We have to conceive of politics as a field of forces the extremes of which are *oikos* [house] and *polis* [city]: between them it is civil war that marks the threshold through which the apolitical is politicized and the political is economized.¹

Giorgio Agamben, *Stasis*

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¹ Note: All translations are the authors' work unless stated otherwise. Giorgio Agamben (2015) *Stasis: La guerra civile come paradigma politico* [The civil war as political paradigm] (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri), p. 30.

‘The mythological machine ... produces mythologies and induces to believe [in them], pressing, that it conceals the myth within its impenetrable walls.’²

Furio Jesi, *Lettura del Bateau Ivre di Rimbaud*

The outbreak of the Arab uprisings in 2011 triggered tectonic changes in the region. On the one hand, there has been a remarkable transformation in the region’s political life, with people gaining new leverage in contesting state power; on the other hand, autocratic regimes have proved to have great resilience, either by launching a process of re-styling through reforms or embarking in fierce battles to maintain power. Algiers, Baghdad, Beirut, Cairo and Khartoum are still hotspots of political confrontation and foundational struggle for state-society configurations as much as for transnational politics. This rehearsal of the ‘Arab Spring’ confirms that the events unfolding since 2011 remain a bitterly contested and misunderstood phenomenon.³ They are still *in fieri*, in progress rather than *in posse*, just potential.

If many academics had viewed the Arab uprisings as the fourth wave of democracy finally reaching the Arab world,⁴ the chaos and violence that followed did not just shatter the dream of democratic transition, but also it solidified the process of ‘othering’ the region as inherently different and backward, still ravaged by sectarian violence and disputes. The outbreak of new conflicts, often degenerating into civil wars; and of old ones (yet to be resolved), is leading scholars and commentators to resuscitate the category of ‘sectarianism’ to explain violence in the Middle East.⁵ The term ‘sectarianism’ often is used to describe sentiments that justify violent and illiberal manifestations of age-old antagonistic religious identities’ (currently in the Middle East, it is Sunni vs. Shi’a), inter-communal warfare and genocidal violence perpetuated by one group against another. Sectarianism is blamed for the chaos, with authoritarianism, conflict, displacement and extremism characterizing the region as a whole. The sectarian card triggers the enunciation of grand theories capable of reducing tangled mechanisms of political life and contention into a dualistic rift, counterpoising antagonistic religious identities animated by primordial impetus and mythological cadres in their mutual struggle. In doing so, sectarianism as a theory understands identity as static and one-dimensional and ignores – or puts in a secondary place – other features such as class, kinship, local or national local identifications that feed sectarian conflicts.⁶

This article revisits ‘sectarianism’ within the political transformations of the region with the aim of formulating an alternative paradigm of interpretation. Introducing the

² Furio Jesi (1996) *Lettura del Bateau Ivre di Rimbaud* [Reading of Rimbaud's Bateau Ivre] (Macerata: Quodlibet, vol. 14), p. 51.

³ We wrote a critique of the ‘Arab Spring’ in a previous article, see Billie Jeanne Brownlee & Maziyar Ghiabi (2016) Passive, Silent and Revolutionary: The ‘Arab Spring’ Revisited, *Middle East Critique*, 25(3), pp. 299–316.

⁴ P. N. Howard, & M. M. Hussain (2013) *Democracy's Fourth Wave?: Digital Media and the Arab Spring* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

⁵ The list of recent scholarship on ‘sectarianism’ is immense. See Google Scholar ‘Sectarianism in the Middle East.’ Available at https://scholar.google.co.uk/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5&q=sectarianism%2C+midd+east&btnG=, accessed February 22, 2021.

⁶ See Usama Makdisi (2017) *The Mythology of the Sectarian Middle East* (James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy of Rice University). Available at: <http://www.bakerinstitute.org/research/mythology-sectarian-middle-east/>.

notion of the ‘mythological machine,’ it argues that ‘sectarianism’ is a myth, something that does not exist, but that has real world effects. The mythological machine is a device that produces epiphanies and myths; it is a gnoseological process whose cultural, social and political effects are generated via mythological facts and, as a machine, it does so through both guiding and automatized mechanisms. Through this interpretive shift, the article proceeds through several theoretical steps using a variety of cases from across West Asia and North Africa. Firstly, it provides a very brief overview of how sectarian scholarship has shaped imperial politics by relying on the ‘expertise’ of Medievalist scholars and how a new scholarship is emerging with a counter discourse. Rather than adopting the framework of ‘sectarianism,’ the article reinterprets ‘civil war’ in continuity with the category of ‘revolts/revolution’, using as a case example the 2011 popular revolts known as the ‘Arab Spring.’ It argues that it is ‘civil war,’ shaped by the work of the mythological machine, which governs state-society relations and transnational politics in the Middle East. Thirdly, the article discusses how the mythological machine incorporates a semantic othering via mythological thinking and practice that shape the perception and experience of civil wars. To conclude, the article reflects on how the mythological machine displaces people’s status within the experience of civil war leading to the emergence of new forms of belonging. Ultimately, the mythological machine creates *states without people*, a condition exhausting the value of citizenship and the political.⁷

The Medievalist-in-Chief and *His* Discontents

Consider: What if the United States, when invading Italy in September 1943, had recruited several scholars of Canon Law – the body of juridical norms agreed by the Catholic Church to regulate the life of believers and the ecclesiastical institutions – life and politics – to study a potential constitutional order suitable for Italian society. Then, once victorious, the US commander-in-chief, instructed by the President, appointed one of these scholars to the role of drafting the post-fascist Italian Constitution to harmonize Italy’s religious Catholic society with the new democratic government.

This odd hypothetical example does not fall far from truth in the case of post-war Iraq. In 2003, at the time of the drafting of the Iraqi Constitution, Paul Bremer, then head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, sought the consultancy of Noah Feldman, a Harvard University law professor, who wrote his doctoral dissertation at Oxford University, ‘Reading the Nicomachean ethics with Ibn Rushd.’ One might wonder ‘what is this topic’s relationship to the complex configuration of Iraq’s modern constitution’? This background may explain how the new constitution resulted in a sectarian artefact immersed in a timeless reading of identity politics, dividing citizenship and institutional authorities along sectarian religious lines. Writing in *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Edward Said reminded readers that Feldman ‘has never practiced law in the Arab world, never been to Iraq ... what an open-faced snub not only to Iraq itself, but also to the legions of Arab and Muslim legal minds ...’.⁸

⁷ Cf. Agamben, *Stasis*, passim.

⁸ Edward Said (2003) *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, 22–28 May (Issue No. 639). Available at <http://www.mafhoum.com/press5/147P10.htm>, accessed August 25, 2020.

Although examples of Medievalists-in-Chief abound in the imperial history of the Middle East, an in-depth discussion falls beyond the remit of this article. Feldman's case is not isolated: It represents a paradigmatic case of Orientalist scholarship influencing contemporary configurations of the Middle East along sectarian lines. There is a long tradition of this kind: Experts of medieval Islam refashioning themselves as experts on contemporary affairs, conflicts and state-society tensions. One of Feldman's intellectual mentors was Bernard Lewis, another 'expert' of Medievalist Islamic thought. Lewis became a prominent international commentator of contemporary Islamic societies, and he advised US Republican administrations, including former US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo.⁹ For example, in an excerpt 'analyzing' Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Lewis wrote:

*There is a radical difference between the Islamic Republic of Iran and other governments with nuclear weapons [apparently forgetful that Iran did not possess nuclear weapons]. This difference is expressed in what can only be described as the apocalyptic worldview of Iran's present rulers... The phrase 'Allah will know his own' is usually used to explain such apparently callous unconcern [killing Muslims while killing unbelievers]... [T]he threat of direct retaliation on Iran is... already weakened by the suicide or martyrdom complex that plagues parts of the Islamic world today... 'This year, August 22 corresponds, in the Islamic calendar, to the 27th day of the month of Rajab [1427]. This, by tradition is the night when many Muslims commemorate the night flight of the prophet Muhammad on the winged horse Buraq to the farthest Mosque in Jerusalem... This might well be deemed an appropriate date for the apocalyptic ending of Israel and if necessary of the world.'*¹⁰

Similarly, Daniel Pipes, founder of the right-wing think tank Middle East Forum, employed his specialization in Medieval Islamic History (PhD, Harvard, 1978) to become a commentator on contemporary politics. He taught at the Naval War College and then acted as policy consultant for US Republican administrations. Pipes's trajectory and political influence is far-reaching despite his rebuke by the academic community. He views Islam as inherently incompatible with the modern world and has influence in conservative political circles.¹¹ For instance, following 9/11, Boris Johnson, then editor of *The Daily Telegraph*, contacted Pipes to get an immediate commentary on the attacks. Beyond the academe, Thomas Friedman (also with an Oxford MPhil), the *New York Times* columnist, has described the conflict in Yemen as a '7th century struggle over who is the rightful heir to the Prophet – Shiites or Sunnis.'¹² However, the rhetoric about 'sectarianism' as innate in the Middle East and as the cause of its 'backwardness' is misleading, obfuscating rather than clarifying the

⁹ See Michael R. Pompeo (2018) On the Passing of Bernard Lewis, May 20. Available at <https://www.state.gov/on-the-passing-of-bernard-lewis/>, accessed August 25, 2020.

¹⁰ In Adib-Moghaddam, A. (2017) *Psycho-Nationalism: Global Thought, Iranian Imaginations* (London: Cambridge University Press), p. 13.

¹¹ Bridge 'Factsheet (2018): Daniel Pipes', August 14. Available at <https://bridge.georgetown.edu/research/factsheet-daniel-pipes/>, accessed August 25, 2020.

¹² Thomas Friedman (2015) Tell Me How This Will End Well, *New York Times*, April 1. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/01/opinion/thomas-friedman-tell-me-how-this-ends-well.html>, accessed August 3, 2020.

complexity of the political turmoil in the region.¹³ Hard to dismiss, this framework is often reworked in more sophisticated, but enduring tones.

There is, however, a new scholarship on ‘sectarianism,’ one that adopts diverging persuasions, none of which is simplistic or essentializing as it has been for the Medievalists-in-Chief. In contrast, scholars of this new school on sectarianism have systematic knowledge of the contemporary Middle East, direct experience in the field, and do not draw arches from the Early and Medieval Islamic period to the present. Simon Mabon is one influential voice who categorizes those working on sectarianism along a classical scheme which in the past was used for scholarship on nationalism, a coincidence that in itself is telling as we will see below: The primordialist who maintains that religious and ethnic divisions affect political struggles (Geneive Abdo, Naser Ghobadzadeh, and Mark Tomass); and the instrumentalists who believe these divisions are subject to change and shifts, driven by material interests (Sami Zuabida, Gregory Gause III, Max Weiss).¹⁴ Most scholars agree with the sectarianisation thesis advanced by Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, who, rather than saying that the region is sectarian, argue that there is a regional process of sectarianisation.¹⁵ The virtue of this argument is to highlight that political Islam often takes the shape of religious nationalism because adherents of this ideology work within the boundaries of the nation-state and are concerned with state building at home, rather than the projection of transnational politics.

This emerging scholarship reassesses sectarianism by taking into account its international and sociological drivers in its most significant cases. Toby Dodge details the origins of Iraq’s post-war settlement, tracing it back to ‘the ideational understanding of Iraq shared by...the Bush administration.’¹⁶ Using the ‘diabolical enemy image’ schema, the United States encouraged the exclusion of social groups formerly perceived as dominant (i.e., Sunni Iraqis), which turns the enemy into ‘inflexible’ and anchored in xenophobic tropes, not dissimilar from the governing mentality of Western imperialism-cum-Orientalism.¹⁷ The mechanism engendered by what Dodge’s refers to as ‘the Victor’s Peace’ compel the excluded ‘Others’ to mobilize along sectarian lines in the setting of emerging civil war. Another case similar to Iraq is that of post-2011 Syria. The Syrian civil war often is described as the prototype of a sectarian conflict, with the Alawi minority holding on to power while the Sunni majority joins the insurgency.¹⁸ However, Heiko Wimmen, head of the International Crisis Group’s Middle East bureau, reports that ‘a significant portion of Syrian Sunnis still support the

¹³ For a critique endorsing our argument see also, Usama Makdisi (2008) Pensee 4: Moving Beyond Orientalist Fantasy, Sectarian Polemic, and Nationalist Denial, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 40(4), pp. 559–560; I. Blumi (2010) *Chaos in Yemen: Societal Collapse and the New Authoritarianism* (London: Routledge).

¹⁴ Simon Mabon (2020) Sectarian Games: Sovereign Power, War Machines and Regional Order in the Middle East, *Middle East Law and Governance*, 12(1), pp. 1–36.

¹⁵ Nader Hashemi & Danny Postel (2017) Sectarianization: Mapping the new politics of the Middle East, *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 15(3), pp. 1–13.

¹⁶ Toby Dodge (2012) Enemy Images, Coercive Socio-Engineering and Civil War in Iraq, *International Peacekeeping* 19(4), pp. 461–477.

¹⁷ Cf. Edward Said (2012) *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage).

¹⁸ D. Byman (2014) Sectarianism afflicts the new Middle East, *Survival*, 56(1), pp. 79–100. See also Billie Jeanne Brownlee (2020) *New Media and Revolution: Resistance and Dissent in Pre-uprising Syria* (London: McGill-Queen’s Press); and idem (2015) The Revolution “From Below” and Its Misinterpretations “From Above”: The Case of Syria’s Neglected Civil Society, *Syria Studies*, 7(1), pp. 31–59.

regime' while the many internally displaced people previously living in Sunni majority areas have sought the central government's protection.¹⁹ The same accounts for the many Alawi protestors who challenged Damascus' repressive policies in the first stages of the protests but then retreated out of fear for genocidal sectarian escalation led by radical Salafis.

Within the new scholarship on 'sectarianism,' one contribution that stands out, according to both Mahon and Dodge, is that of Fanar Haddad who argues that sectarianism is neither all-encompassing nor non-existent; it is 'not *just* a tool of political elites seeking to secure their power and privilege; not *just* a matter of dogma and belief; not *just* a political issue or a frame for intergroup competition at the subnational level.' Sectarianism is 'shorthand for a variety of symbols, behaviours, actions, attitudes and other phenomena related to sectarian identity.' He recognises that sectarianism is a function of nationalism and a contest about 'who gets to define the terms of coexistence.'²⁰ Haddad suggests that we not dismiss sectarianism *in toto*, but to qualify it with analytical meaning rather than grand schemes rooted in old and stereotypical narratives.

In dialogue with, rather than against, the emerging scholarship on sectarianism, this article takes 'sectarianism' not as the departure point, but as an epistemic venue, which has come to define the broader narrative of political life, in fact, beyond the so-called Middle East. The article explores a shift in perspective. It is not sectarianism, which has become a defining feature of the Middle East, but rather 'civil wars.' Sectarianism is only the expression of civil wars. Since 2000, over one-third of all armed conflicts that emerged around the world were in the Middle East. This number has grown to half since 2011. The Syrian civil war, now in its tenth year, has reached two unfortunate milestones: It is the deadliest armed conflict in the new century and the second most lethal conflict since the Cold War, surpassed only by the massacres in Rwanda in 1994.²¹ When shifting the perspective from sectarianism to civil wars, one realizes that it is civil wars that have radicalized communities and unleashed violence along religious, ethnic and sectarian lines. It is civil wars that have generated the flood of refugees across and beyond the region. It is civil wars that have nurtured terrorist groups and attracted foreign terrorist recruits to the region. It is civil wars that enable authoritarian regimes in survival mode to justify repression rather than reform and concession as the only way to deal with the underlying political, economic and social challenges facing them. And, finally, it is through civil wars that international powers administer geopolitics.²²

The 'Great Civil War,' what this article identifies as the period between 2001-2021, has produced the collapse of state institutions, the transformation of ideologies, the spread of civil unrest and violence and the displacement of communities across borders. What governs the mechanics of the Great Civil War is the mythological machine,

¹⁹ See Genevieve Abdo (2013) *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Sunni-Shi'a Divide*, *Analysis Paper*, 29. Available at <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-new-sectarianism-the-arab-uprisings-and-the-rebirth-of-the-shia-sunni-divide/>, accessed March 1, 2021.

²⁰ Fanar Haddad (2020) *Understanding 'Sectarianism': Sunni-Shi'a Relations in the Modern Arab World* (New York: Oxford University Press).

²¹ Jacob Mundy (2019) *The Middle East Is Violence: On the Limits of Comparative Approaches to the Study of Armed Conflict*, *Civil Wars*, 21(4), pp. 539–568.

²² See, for the Libyan case, Matteo Capasso (2020) *The War and the Economy: The Gradual Destruction of Libya*, *Review of African Political Economy*, 47, no. 166 (2020), pp. 545–567.

which fabricates ‘sectarianism’ and constructs new forms of ‘belonging’ that displaces the old notions of nation-state and community. However, before progressing to the analysis of the Great Civil War, we need to define the mythological machine more comprehensively.

What Is the Mythological Machine?

The mythological machine is a gnoseological device – because it produces knowledge – that enables the persuasive power of myths. As an interpretative paradigm it indicates a complex apparatus that incorporates and transfers collective experiences together with socialized knowledge of ‘truth’ and history, while it reproduces mythologies, via tales, narrations and artistic figurations autonomously from the source they derive. Different from mere propaganda, the mythological machine has a life on its own. It is an engine which does not simply produce or re-interpret myths in new fashion; it produces discourses, ideologies and material effects, which legitimise power and stabilise identity, two key elements of a sectarian civil war. In it, thinking, speech and practice concur and co-produce the work of the machine, rather than following a sequential line of idea, expressions and actions. Thus, the mythological machine guides the conflict in the discernment of friends from enemies, which nurtures the sectarian nature of reality.

As Furio Jesi says, ‘Whoever believes in the existence of myths as an existing autonomous substance is eventually brought to consider himself as the depository of the exegesis which ... distinguishes the righteous from the unjust, those who can live from those who must die.’²³ This process enables what Karol Kerényi, the Hungarian classicist mythologist, identified as the birth of ‘technicised myths,’ the use of images, superstitions, suggestions, passions, texts for an instrumental purpose dictated by political objectives, which he argued emerged more blatantly during the rise of Nazi-fascism in early 20th century Europe. So, mythological systems are reactionary by nature because they are built upon a sentiment of an imagined but lost world to which they seek to return. Metaphorically, this is not a world of yesterday or, even less so, of tomorrow. It is a world of the day before yesterday, the bygone, and the world after tomorrow, the yet to come. The mythological machine’s ontological objective is to defend pre-existing social structures and power relations, of which they are the ideological expression. Indeed, it is not the essence of myths that matters, but their actual existence, their real function. Following this conceptual overview of what is a mythological machine, we shall move to put this machine into action and to understand its praxis, which occurs through ideational, philological, and practical processes (Figure 1).

The Great Civil War, 2001–2021: Myths and Disruption

The ‘Great Civil War’ is the term we employ to refer to the set of confrontations, conflicts, terrorist attacks, foreign interferences, attempted secessions and heightened ethno-religious violence that emerged after the US declaration of the ‘War on Terror’ following September 11, 2001, especially the US military interventions in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. Since 2011, a series of popular protests have shaken the

²³ In M. Belpoliti & E. Manera (eds.) (2010) *Furio Jesi* (Milano: Marcos y Marcos), p. 205. For an overview of Jesi’s work on the mythological machine, see Furio Jesi (1989) *Mito* (Milano: Mondadori).

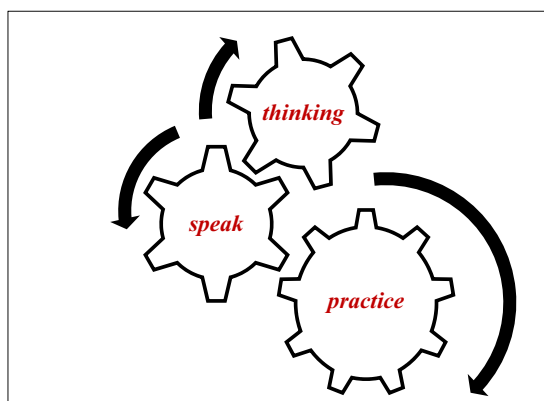


Figure 1. The mythological machine.

region's political cadre: It did not take long for popular political demands to shift against specific ethnic or religious groups, accelerating the process of territorial disintegration and societal transformation after 2001. Civil wars characterize the political struggle in Bahrain, Libya, Syria and Yemen but spread beyond these cases reaching Egypt, where anti-Muslim Brotherhood fear led to levels of repression along sectarian lines (anti-Islamists) which became more blatant than in the pre-uprising era. Reverberations of this kind, though opposite, were also visible in Turkey, either with the long-term conflict with the Kurds or with the polarizing confrontation between Turkish president Recep T. Erdoğan and most of the Turkish non-AKP opposition.

The conflict in Turkey as well as those in Afghanistan, Egypt, Iraq, Libya and Yemen have been contested within the framework of political struggles, which have not led to a 'sectarianization' of the conflict, even though religion has not absent. They have been struggles over *how* to govern the nation rather than over *who* belongs to the nation. The continuum between revolt/revolution and civil war is where the agency of the mythological machine is most effective in transforming the political struggle into a praxis of 'othering' by intervening in the *modi operandi* of knowledge production. There is no epistemic difference between forms of civil war in the Middle East and those in other regions. Instead, it is the triggering of the mythological machine that displaces existing forms of belonging in favour of new ones. Thus, observers and local fighters interpret civil wars through localized semantics, in the absence of global frames of interpreting political revolts. This semantics is imbued in multiple layers of meaning: in mythological thinking, situating the contemporary world in a time before the origins; philological – using language as interpreter of realities; and political – outlining strategies for framing conflicts and collective futures. By introducing the analytical model of the mythological machine, this section discusses the significance of 'myths' and 'mythologies' in the understanding of the Great Civil War, highlighting also the epistemological, philological and practical dimensions deriving from it.

Mythological Thinking

For those accepting it, a 'myth' is a true (hi)story which occurred in a time of origins – of the universe or of a community. It provides a model, a paradigm of behavior that

– in virtue of its foundational nature – is always valid, creating forms of mythic ancestries to be imitated and a flow of time whence everything already had happened once. As a device narrating human life and the life of communities, ‘myths’ produce forms of knowledge that become ‘mythologies’ (*mythos* + *logos*).²⁴ Inspired by religious or nationalist hagiographies or epics, mythologies operate also as an attempt at qualifying the community of origins and, hence in nationalist/religious, sect-coded logics, the present communities. Both self-declared secular nationalists and religious clerics embrace them. This is the case among ethno-nationalist groups claiming to restore the lands of their fathers (e.g., Aryanism, Zionism, white supremacism, Hindutva, etc.); but it works similarly with scholars in Islamic jurisprudence and exegesis highlighting the need to return to the times of origin (e.g., Salafism, ISIS jurists).²⁵

For example, the science (*ilm*) of *hadith* builds upon the narrations of mythological histories for the enunciation of norms and morals pertaining to the present. The Islamic State systematically has employed early Islamic (hi)stories to justify its tactics against local and regional enemies, especially Shi’is. In the case of Abu Asaad Al-Samaan, an ISIS-affiliated jurist, he used the *hadith* of Safiyya bint Abdul-Mutalib (570-640 AD) to legitimise the practice of beheading in the combat setting.²⁶ Or Khaled Ibn al-Walid, one of the commanders during the Islamic conquests, who killed captive prisoners with no justification other than his pledge to God ‘to make a river with his enemies’ blood.’²⁷ *Hadiths*, because they are realistic tales belonging to the era of the righteous community – the community of origin – become powerful mobilisation tools for undertaking violent actions.

ISIS it is not the only political group that makes use of mythologies to define who is and who is not part of the nation. The grand mufti of Saudi Arabia, Abdal Aziz ibn Baz, formulated an extensive body of literature and sermons condemning the Shi’is. His language focuses on disloyalty, esoterism, weird practices portraying the Shi’is as malignant others who do not qualify as ‘our brothers.’²⁸ His *fatwas* remain an influential source in the juridical practice of Saudi courts. These rulings bear discursive and symbolic value, but also effective application of power. In 2014, a Saudi court sentenced a Sunni man to prison because of the crime of ‘sitting with Shi’i.’²⁹ Inspired by this reading, the leader of Al-Qaida in Iraq, al-Zarqawi wrote of the Shi’i’s as ‘the most evil of mankind,’ ‘the lurking snake, the crafty and malicious scorpion, the spying enemy, ... a sect of treachery and betrayal through history.’³⁰

The casting out of the enemy as a mythological force requires a vital response from the community. The mythological nature of the enemy, in this case the Shi’is, shapes the understanding of contemporary conflicts, such as the Great Civil War. Sheikh

²⁴ It is worth noting how ‘mythology’ is itself an inherently paradoxical category as it is a coexistence of ‘myths,’ i.e., ‘stories that are not true’ and ‘logos,’ i.e., stories that can be understood. See further Belpoliti & Manera (eds.), *Furio Jesi*, pp. 188–190.

²⁵ We are aware that the cases of Zionism and Hindutva represent an overlapping of the ethno-nationalist and religious ideologies, but within the scheme of our analysis, this difference between the two is not important.

²⁶ Hassan Hassan (2017) *The Sectarianism of*, pp. 56–57.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ See Human Rights Watch (2017) *They Are not Our Brothers*, September 26. Available at <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/09/26/they-are-not-our-brothers/hate-speech-saudi-officials>, accessed July 30, 2020.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ US Department of State 2001-09 Archive, Zarqawi Letter. Available at <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/nea/rls/31694.htm>, accessed July 30, 2020.

Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a leading Sunni theologian and jurist formerly based at Al-Azhar in Cairo, declared in a *fatwa* that, since the Syrian Civil War was a plot by the invading Shi'is, it was the duty of 'every Muslim trained to fight ... to make himself available.'³¹ In the Wahhabi penal code, which is *de facto* the law of the land in Saudi Arabia while being influential across the Arab monarchies overall, the concept of loyalty to Islam and rejection of un-Islamic ways (*wala wal bara*) has facilitated the targeting of Shi'is both in terms of morally not belonging to the community and as a practical endeavour against them. Together with *tawhid* (the oneness of God), *wala wal bara* (loyalty and disavowal) has played a central role in the Islamic State's governance of otherness.³²

The vision of a rising manipulative enemy, the Shi'is, acquired rhetorical geopolitical marks when the Hashemite monarch of Jordan described the escalation of conflicts in the Levant as a sign of 'a Shi'i Crescent.'³³ Such assertion emboldens mythological thinking, a prototype, though opposite, of which was also manifest in what Ali Allawi, Iraq's interim defence minister in the Iraqi Governing Council and Iraqi Transnational Government (2003-2006) circulated in a document proposing a grand political strategy to fellow party members of the United Iraqi Alliance whereby Iraq was envisioned with a dominant Shi'i ruling group along with smaller sects and ethnicities.³⁴ Competing ideas about what is national identity foment the questioning of localized expressions of it.

The sectarian rift, what some call the sectarianisation of the region, is not simply the effect caused by historical mistakes or the manipulation of autocratic and destabilized regimes. As Fanar Haddad argues, the fall of Saddam Hussein was ambivalent even for those Sunnis who had opposed his rule because the celebrations were 'so heavily tinged with someone else's mythology of victimhood and entitlement,'³⁵ that is to say to the Shi'is recollecting elements of the myth of Hussein's martyrdom at Karbala (in 680 CE). These mythologies produce laws and regulations, hence models of behaviour, but also mythological thinking on communal history and enemy communities. In this way, sectarianism is the commonplace, the 'myth' – which cannot be accessed or ascertained – of the Great Civil War. This mythological narrative is the product of localised as much as globalised processes of knowledge production obtained through the work of a mythological machine.

Mythological Speak

The mythological machine reifies the category of 'civil war' because it sets clear boundaries between competing communities, which become, in turn, insoluble. The Arabic concept of 'civil war,' usually translated in sociological and politico-logical writings as *harb ahliyyah*, differs in its connotation from the English 'civil war' and

³¹ BBC (2003) Syria Conflict: Qaradawi Urges Sunnis to Join Rebels, June 1. Available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-22741588>, accessed August 3, 2020.

³² Hassan, *The Sectarianism*, pp. 41–42.

³³ NBC News (2004) King Abdullah of Jordan, September 12. Available at http://www.nbcnews.com/id/6679774/ns/msnbc-hardball_with_chris_matthews/t/king-abdullah-ii-jordan/#.X0S86cgzY2x, accessed August 24, 2020.

³⁴ Haddad, *Shia-centric State-Building*, pp. 118–119.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

the Latin *bellum civile*. *Harb ahliyyah* refers to kith and kin, to community rather than to citizens, whereas ‘civil war’ and *bellum civile* highlight the civic dimension of the conflict, i.e., a conflict over the city-power, the *polis*. In *harb ahliyyah*, communities are the product of a gnoseological machine, which sets their origins in mythological communities (such as the early Christian communities; the Sunni/Shi’i communities; the ancient Judean tribes; the pre-Islamic Zoroastrian Iranians). They are not conflicts over the content of government. In this, the Arabic term captures the genealogical origin of the Greek idea of civil war, as the war over the *oikos*, ‘the house’ as a subgroup of the community. More precisely, the classical term for civil war in Persian/Dari is *khaneh jangi*, a ‘house war,’ a war over the *oikos*.³⁶

The outbreak of civil wars following the ‘Arab Spring’ also has led to a revival of the Arabic term *fitnah* (also used in Persian as *fetneh*). A strongly connoted word, this is a term used outside intellectual and academic circles, but adopted by active agents in the civil war, particularly in reference to the archetypal Sunni-Shi’i divide throughout the region; and more specifically vis-à-vis those perceived as pro-Iranian forces.³⁷ Beyond its theological implications, the concept of *fitnah* alludes to underlying (geo)political events within the history of Islam, in particular that of the great sedition between Shi’i and Sunni over government in the early Islamic Caliphate (7th century), the period very dear to the Medievalists-in-Chief. *Fitnah* is a moment of crisis in which the community of believers, the mythological community of the *ummah*, is split and faced with the judgment over who should command the community, its government. Historically, Wars of Apostasy (*horub al-ridda*), led by the First Caliph Abu Bakr, after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, preceded the *fitnah*. This is a period of confrontation over the constituent power and those rejecting it (rebel Arabian tribes, Kharijites, Alids, etc.).

The reference to this old historical period to characterize the nature of the contemporary conflict is void of political value. The contemporary use of *fitnah* in the Great Civil War alludes to a framing of the events following the ‘Arab Spring’ in fundamentally sectarian ways, which implies and produces a process of depoliticisation of the popular struggle initiated in 2011. It includes references to non-Sunni groups as heretic *majus* (Zoroastrians, polytheists), *munafiq* (hypocrites), *zindig* (atheists),³⁸ who do not belong to the original Islamic community (the *Salaf*). This evolution in the framing of the civil war also marks a stark difference between the civil wars outside the Arab world, such as the French, Greek, Russian and Spanish civil wars, interpreted as wars between citizens based on different ideologies and visions of the future, and civil wars in the Middle East, which are interpreted as wars between kinsfolk, that conflagrate the question of ‘blood,’ ‘culture,’ or ‘nations’ and myths. In other words, civil wars as conflicts over different visions of the past, turning them into a struggle over who belongs to a time of origins (the mythology of the *fitnah*) or to a space of belonging (the *house*, nation, the mythology of the *ahl*). To the accusation of *fitnah* follows that of polytheist practices (*shirk*), which is an accusation of venerating false mythologies, of speaking ‘untruth.’ For instance, when in control of new territories, the Islamic State has targeted shrines and devotional sites often belonging to Sufi congregations

³⁶ As opposed to the modern term, which is *jang-e dakheli*, ‘domestic war.’

³⁷ On the other hand, Iranian authorities have adopted the category of *fetneh* to refer to protesters manifesting against the political order, as opposed to protesters asking for reforms.

³⁸ Also in reference to Iranians as the word means ‘very stingy’, an ancient accusation the Arabs in the Peninsula made against Persians.

and Shi'i groups. This clearing of other mythologies is material, but it pursues also a semantic objective as it seeks to extirpate the cultural practices of healing and benediction that exist around these sites. It is also a combat against the Other's capacity at magical thinking through the power of mythologies.

The shift from a struggle over *how to govern a nation* to *who belongs to it* empties the political value of a conflict often born out of a revolution or revolt and activates the mythological machine. The attempt at overthrowing the state is an attempt at imaging a new order, alternative forms of political and social organization. The failure to achieve change, either because the existing order remains in place (i.e., Syria, Iraq) or because the new ruling cadre does not hold the force to exercise power and dispose a new order (Libya, Yemen), brings about a situation of civil war, whereby regional and international powers project their respective mythologies (together with military hardware) upon conflicting parties. When civil war fails to produce a new political order because the contending forces lack the means to establish a new one, even through negotiations, the objective becomes that of *maximizing disorder*.³⁹ From a confrontation, even with armed means, over the nature of the political order, the question transits to the confrontation over control of territory, the foundation of new mythological communities, and the reification of belonging, all of which requires the targeted pumping of violence against the Other.⁴⁰ The subliminal question at this stage is over *who belongs to the house/nation*; and not over *how the house should be run*. This brings about 'the depoliticization of citizenship' – the lost right of governing the city-space – in favor of the 'mobilization of the unpolitical' – the enfranchisement of values related to 'blood,' 'family,' 'creed,' and foundational myths.

If we conceive civil wars through this prism, it is common to find the use of such terms as 'alien,' 'satanic,' 'apostates' and 'traitors.' Cynicism toward political engagement and organized collective action drives the interpretation of world affairs, with fear becoming a central sentiment. It leads to appeals for a strong man to lead the community, the man of order who opposes the paradigm of the partisan and the revolutionary, whose power lies in his communal bonds with powerless categories. Fear and mythologies are genealogically tied, as all mythologies, as Furio Jesi reminds us, are about death and the nationalists' *religio mortis* (religion of death).⁴¹ The emphasis on purifying the community, extracting the alien elements from it, and embracing death – both meted and martyred – coopts mythologies that while deploying ancient referents, formulate also a love for death, somehow similar to the formulations characterizing ISIS in contemporary times. In this context, mythologies are the prelude to the mobilization of the unpolitical: The cultural, psychological and even physical (gendered) elements ousting ideological civics, the family which in turn props up the nation.

Mythological Practice

As hitherto discussed, the mythological machine feeds the civil war parties through processes of 'othering' vs. 'belonging,' and 'insider' vs. 'outsider.' The process of

³⁹ Agamben, *Stasis*, p. 11.

⁴⁰ This transformation of the political culture is an essential element of the 'new' nationalism in the post-Arab revolt era. We will be discussing the rise of the 'culture of the right' in a forthcoming book: Brownlee B. J. & M. Ghiabi *States without People* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, forthcoming).

⁴¹ Furio Jesi (1979) *Cultura di destra* [Culture of the right] (Milano: Garzanti), pp. 31–42.

‘othering’ in the work of the mythological machine is given by the paradigm of the ‘blood accusation’ (known also as blood libel). The practice dates back to the accusation that the Jews used Christian blood in the preparation of their Passover food and drinks. It is a paradigmatic case of the mythological machine. For example, in 1144, the Christian community of Norwich, England accused the Jews of having murdered a young boy, William of Norwich, and to have performed a ritual sacrifice using his blood during Passover. The myth propagated across the island and Europe. It reappeared in the trial of the Jews in 1840 Damascus, where Tommaso da Calangiano and Ebrahim Amarah, a Christian missionary of the Cappucino order and his servant, were alleged to have disappeared after visiting the Jewish quarter in Damascus.⁴² This ‘event’ becomes a trope in the anti-Semitic ideology of later decades, including in charges that the Jewish community fomented the anti-Christian purges of 1860 Damascus.⁴³ What matters in this example is the way the mythological machine produces an image of the ‘Other’ as not simply different, but opposite to the one of the accuser (e.g., Jesus’s sacrificial blood in the Eucharist versus Christian blood in Jews’ Passover rituals).⁴⁴ It is the ‘Other’ as the unresolvable alien that is the object of the mythological machine.⁴⁵

In the Great Civil War, the equivalent of the blood accusation is *takfir*. The word means ‘accusing someone of apostasy [*kufir*].’ The accusation is used by Islamist groups in the fight against those Muslims who do not align with the former’s fundamentalist, often militant vision of their creed. More often, radical jihadi groups, especially the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, have addressed Shi’is and heterodox Muslim groups – and Iranians overall – with the accusation of *takfir*, apostasy, claiming that they are not true believers, attributing to them a set of mythological crimes akin to the blood libel.⁴⁶ As in all mythological machines, the enemy is rendered void of human value and of the civic right to exist, displaced from their place within the political and ethical order of life, which we could link to Agamben’s enunciation of *homo sacer*.⁴⁷ The Other, hence, also is seen as the conspirator molding history, over-powerful, omnipresent and yet deceitful and miserable.

⁴² Also cited in David Bidussa’s ‘Introduction’ to Furio Jesi (1993) *L'accusa del sangue: mitologie dell'antisemitismo* [The Blood Libel: Mythologies of Anti-semitism] (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri), pp. vii–xxx.

⁴³ See Leila Fawaz (1994) *An occasion for war: Civil conflict in Lebanon and Damascus in 1860* (Berkeley: University of California Press).

⁴⁴ Jesi, *L'accusa del sangue*, pp. 17–42.

⁴⁵ Ussama Makdisi, writing about the July 1860 anti-Christian riot in Damascus: ‘Despite the edicts promulgating nondiscrimination, a Muslim mob rampaged through the city, pillaging churches and terrorising the city’s Christian inhabitants. Newspapers in London and Paris and missionary societies condemned what they saw as ‘Mohammedan’ fanaticism ... European powers set up a commission of inquiry to investigate the massacres of 1860. Their humanitarian motives, however, were conditional and political. No corresponding commission, after all, was formed to investigate the US oppression and persecution of people of African descent or its extermination of Native Americans, the decades of French colonial terror in Algeria, or the British suppression of the anticolonial uprising in India in 1857.’ Makdisi (2017b) ‘Cosmopolitan Ottomans and the Myth of the Sectarian Middle East’, *AEON*, October 17. Available at <https://aeon.co/essays/ottoman-cosmopolitanism-and-the-myth-of-the-sectarian-middle-east>, accessed August 13, 2020.

⁴⁶ See William McCants (2014) Satan’s Slaves: Why ISIS Wants to Enslave a Religious Minority in Iraq, *Brookings*, October 14. Available at <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2014/10/14/satans-slaves-why-isis-wants-to-enslave-a-religious-minority-in-iraq/>.

⁴⁷ Cf. Agamben (2003) *Stato di eccezione: Homo sacer, II, I* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri).

The mythological machine of *takfir* – as that of the blood accusation, of eugenics, of the migrant barbarism – aims at a process of purification, of cleansing of the community, of the body politic. It is an essential recipe to the foundation of the mythological nation as the true nation-state, from being a utopia ('a place that does not exist') to being the *eu-topia* ('the good place').⁴⁸ In the Great Civil War, the cleansing occurs against the grain of 20th century colonial history. It targets Sunnis in areas of Shi'i rule; Shi'i and Christian and other heterodox communities such as the Yezidis, in those territories where the radical jihadists take control. In the case of ISIS – and, generally, Salafism, which embraces *takfir* as ideology – we can see the work of the mythological machine more blatantly. As a social practice, *takfir* concerns the definition of who is a Muslim among those who live in the community, i.e., within the house-nation. This view holds that the enemies within are far more dangerous than the far enemies, for instance in the West, bolstering the logic of civil war. To ascertain membership in a community, the Islamic State has adopted a process of investigation [*tabayun*], turning on its head the traditional practice of trusting those who profess Islam as their religion (through the *shahadah*), unless proven otherwise. Instead, *takfiri* mythological thinking instructs that one is a *kafir* unless the contrary is proved.

Practices that fall under the category of *takfir* are many and they mostly are identified with all those Muslim groups that do not follow the strict Wahhabi interpretation of Islamic law. Its implications are major: it allows the killing and robbing of Muslims deemed infidel, that is to say, the 'malignant other.'⁴⁹ These teachings are enshrined in the sermons of several Saudi clerics who regularly legitimize violence against Shi'is as a justified means of combat.⁵⁰ This logic is the essence of a civil war governed by the mythological machine, where belonging and affiliation to the community stands above all other considerations.

In itself, the establishment of the Islamic State was based on re-claiming the foundation of a new purified state, a promised land for all discontented Muslims living either in the non-Muslim West or in the usurped land of Muslim 'hypocritical' governments. The call for return addressed all the discontented Muslims as members of a new ancient community envisioned as the mythological community of the prophet. The establishment of a Caliphate – rather than a republic or an emirate – indicated also the foundational importance of a new and ancient space of sovereignty. It is the promise for a Sunni nation that has yet to be and, at the same time, that was in a past which is not only remote, but it is a past that is also the archetype of all times, i.e., the times of origins, of myths. This vision is the work of the mythological machine within the Great Civil War. In the absence of political principles around which to organize the community, the mythologies become a substitute, in the form of the principles of a promised land, the return to a golden era and the embracement of timeless moral codes – as opposed to the time-bound laws of contemporary societies. This process occurs in localized forms, but also in the form of global developments in the idea of modern nations/states.

⁴⁸ That is how the Nazi ideologues intended to build the new state cleansed of others, such as communists, gypsies, homosexuals and Jews. See Belpoliti & Manera, *Furio Jesi*, pp. 132–133.

⁴⁹ One particular group within the Islamic State, known as the *Hazmiyyah*, espouses this vision; see Hasan, *The Sectarianism*, p. 49.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

The pledge to establish a purified state, or the pursuit of a promised land for displaced people, has precedents in modern history, specifically the Zionist movement's efforts beginning at the end of the nineteenth century to establish a Jewish state in Palestine. The second wave of Russian Jews fleeing pogroms in Tsarist Russia included some who responded to the call of the early Zionist movement for *alia* and moved to Palestine, a province within the Turkish Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the twentieth century: 'Return to the promised land' or 'ascent to' the higher status of the original state, i.e., *Eretz Israel*. The movement identified Palestine as the space for its nation and for the nationalist cause, declaring it as 'a land without people for people without land,' where Jewish immigrants could settle freely to re-establish the mythological community of Eretz Israel, the Land of Israel. Historian Ilan Pappé examined numerous diaries of Russian settlers and identified a recurrent theme in those pages, namely the description of local people, the Arabs, as 'aliens.' One settler wrote: '[p]eople ... were more strange to us than the Russian or Polish peasant ... We have nothing in common with the majority of the people living here ... They were not just "aliens," they were aggressive aliens.'⁵¹ Another settler, Yosef Rabinowitch, who was a zealot fighter opposing the employment of Palestinians in agricultural labour, defined the local population as 'the evil [*hara' hazeh*].' Even when comforted by a pleasant encounter with an indigenous person, he would say: 'I met a decent farmer ... [potentially] a 'Raa Hola [*'malignant evil*].'⁵² The recurrence of 'evil' and 'malignant other' represent tropes in the work of mythological machines, which, as said earlier, qualifies the other not only as the enemy but also as the ultimate opposite to the community of belonging.

The paradoxical way Zionist settlers then, and right-wing Israeli groups today, refer to the native population as 'alien' is the work of the mythological machine of the promised land which rejects the existence of a distinct indigenous (i.e. Palestinian) humanity, othering them into an inescapable evil, which motivated past policies and probable future visions.⁵³ One example is the far-right Israeli group Lehava, which among its core objectives is to expel all non-Jews, including Christians, from the land of Israel. The plan would guarantee the genetic purity of Jews, as instructed by Orthodox Judaism (e.g., prohibition of inter-faith marriage).⁵⁴ The group has accused Christian Arabs of being 'blood sucking vampires,' redeploying the 'blood libel' against Palestinians living in Israel.⁵⁵ This trope is not a marginal expression within the political scene; instead, it is part of a broader movement embracing religious nationalist mythologies around purity. For instance, Rafi Peretz, a former Minister of

⁵¹ Ilan Pappé (2012) Shtetl Colonialism: First and Last Impressions of Indigeneity by Colonised Colonisers, *Settler Colonial Studies* 2(1), pp. 39–58.

⁵² Ibid, p. 53.

⁵³ A rise of neo-settler colonialism and right wing nativism has emerged in the global South, for example in Bolivia after the coup against Evo Morales, in Brazil with the election of Jair Bolsonaro, in India with Narendra Modi.

⁵⁴ See, for instance, Y. Hakak, (2016) 'Undesirable relationships' between Jewish Women and Arab Men: Representation and discourse in contemporary Israel, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39(6), pp. 976–993.

⁵⁵ Haaretz (2018) Jewish extremists' leader: "Christians are blood-sucking vampires who should be expelled from Israel," April 10. Available at https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-jewish-extremist-group-wants-to-ban-christmas-in-israel-1.5380284?fbclid=IwAR1Px5PEfmZILXu36wsmCWL1JIPytO0-XGuBbUGImCUK7Hk38T_ttb13C7M, accessed August 20, 2020; And Yardena Schwartz (2018) Israel's Alt-Right Movement Is Now Mainstream, *Newsweek*, July 3. Available at <https://www.newsweek.com/2018/03/16/israel-alt-right-mainstream-lawmakers-stop-it-832386.html>, accessed August 25, 2020.

Education, declared that assimilation of American Jews is a ‘second Holocaust,’ in other words, it equates to the disappearance of the Jewish race.⁵⁶ Along with this thinking, mythological ‘scientific’ practice has gained legitimacy. Racial thinking and genetic purity have returned to the foreground. In 2020, Israel’s High Court declared the use of the DNA test as proof of a person’s Jewishness to be legitimate and, therefore, their eligibility to request *Aliyah*, according to the Law of Return in 1950.⁵⁷

The othering of the enemy works through the mythological machine of the rightful nation, which demands return to a promised land now purified from the malignant other, the Palestinian. Within the logic of the civil war, which dominates Israel’s politics toward the Palestinians and, prior to that, with the Zionist movement’s conquest, there is no place for political and civic life of the other as Other. As Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared during the 2015 unrest, ‘Whoever wants to be Israeli must be Israeli all the way ... I will not accept two states within Israel.’⁵⁸ His son, Yair, speaking to a Christian Evangelical audience in Alabama, explained what this vision entails, ‘Most of the Arabs who live today in the land of Israel and who call themselves “Palestinians,” only came to the land about 100 years ago from neighboring countries.’ To support his claim, he added that ‘one of the most common last names in the Palestinian Authority is *al-masri* [Egyptian]. Another is *al-halabi* [from Halab, Aleppo] or *al-hijazi* [from the Hijaz in the Arabian Peninsula]. You see, not only the Jews were the first in the land of Israel in ancient times, they were the first in modern times too.’⁵⁹

States without People?

If the notion of nation-states was never a successful and complete process in the Middle East (much as elsewhere), the outbreak of civil wars and the displacement of communities between and across borders is questioning the very nature of states, sovereignty and citizenship. So the underlining question is who lives in these states? One of the mythological machine’s key counter-effects is the manifestation of multidimensional displacement. The first occurs under the violence driven by civil war which causes the physical and geographical dislocation of people; the second is the displacement experienced by those living through protracted civil wars and who find themselves in a condition where ideas about their civic-politics, their *polis*, is unsettled and unsettling. These two types of displacement are not disjointed; their relationship is circular because physical displacement enhances the ideational dislocation, which in turn sharpens the territorialisation of mythological claims around who belongs to the house-nation (Figure 2).

⁵⁶ *The Independent* (2019) Fury after Israeli Minister Likens Inter-marriage among Diaspora Jews to a “second Holocaust”, July 10. Available at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/israel-minister-intermarriage-diaspora-jews-holocaust-rafi-peretz-a8998421.html>, accessed August 4, 2020.

⁵⁷ Haaretz (2020) Israeli High Court Allows DNA Testing to Prove Judaism, January 24). Available at: <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-israeli-high-court-allows-dna-testing-to-prove-judaism-1.8439615>, accessed July 4, 2020.

⁵⁸ Haaretz (2016) Netanyahu: “I won’t accept lawless state within Israel”, January 2. Available at <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-netanyahu-i-won-t-accept-lawless-state-within-israel-1.5384968>, accessed July 30, 2020.

⁵⁹ 59 Tal Shalev (2019) Tweet, July 5. Available at <https://twitter.com/talshalev1/status/1147063152418414592>, accessed August 24, 2020.

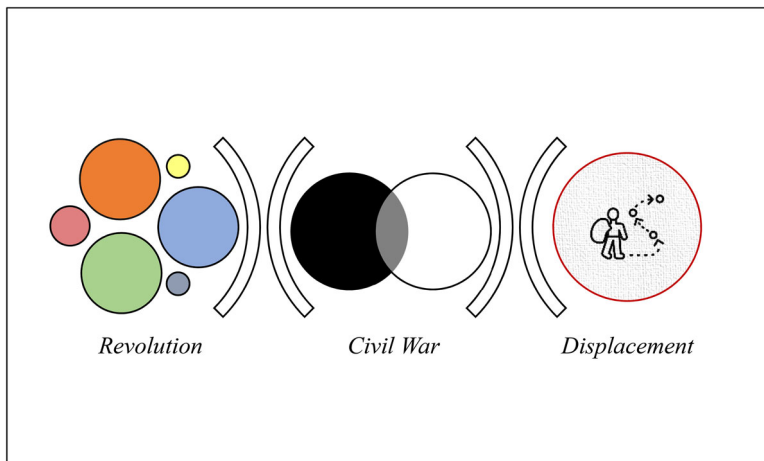


Figure 2. Revolt-civil war-displacement.

It is this second type of displacement upon which the mythological machine has greater influence. One no longer can imagine the nation; neither can one conceive of *communitas* in those terms agreed prior the revolt, because the rite of passage that distinguishes those within the community from those outside it was abolished with the outbreak of the civil war.⁶⁰ Bonds of social relations become part of new mythological communities. The failure of the revolt to institute a political community organized around civic values – as opposed to sectarian belonging – reifies the rite of passage into civil war. The boundaries of civic recognition – the social glue of *communitas* – disappear. However, this does not make way for the logic of the partisan, which rules in political revolutionary struggles, but rather makes space for the logic of blood, of the householder, of the father, of those who share common mythologies. The condition of life in displacement is therefore that of liminal life, a life harbored along a passage from the condition of the past order (the object against which the revolt or civil war occurred in the first place) and the completely new order, the coming community (the desire for political renewal).⁶¹ In this liminal space, the mythological machine governs the politics of displacement, in ideational as well material effects.

The 2003 Iraq War was a watershed moment, which set the pattern for the outbreak of multiple civil wars or, as we call it, the Great Civil War. In the period between 2006-2008, sectarian violence forced five percent of Iraq's total population to leave their homes and settle elsewhere inside Iraq, while an additional 2 million fled the country entirely.⁶² With the consolidation of the Islamic State in 2014 and the erasure of international borders between Iraq and Syria, the ethnic and sectarian landscapes of towns, cities and regions have changed indefinitely. Beyond Iraq, the ethnic and religious heterogeneity of the region was reconfigured by the design of new human

⁶⁰ For a compelling analysis of the liminal moments of revolutions, see Walter Armbrust (2019) *Martyrs and Tricksters: An Ethnography of the Egyptian Revolution* (Oxford: Princeton University Press).

⁶¹ Cf. Roberto Esposito (1998) *Communitas: origine e destino della comunità* [Communitas: The Origin and destiny of community] (Torino: Einaudi).

⁶² International Organisation of Migration, Iraq (2010). Available at https://www.iom.int/jahia/webdav/shared/shared/mainsite/activities/countries/docs/Iraq/IOM_Iraq_Review_of_Displacement_and_Return_in_Iraq_August_2010.pdf, accessed August 23, 2020.

geographies and political imaginations driven by the logics of the mythological machine. Ongoing identity-based population displacements are not only reconstituting Iraqi, Libyan, Syrian and Yemeni societies but also reshaping those countries that are absorbing them, like Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia, Turkey (and Iran if we consider the Afghan refugee and migrant population; and also Iraqi Arabs and Kurds). For instance, the prolonged displacement of Syrian refugees beyond national borders not only is shifting the ethnic balance within Syria but also triggering national anxieties in countries like Jordan and Lebanon, where the presence of refugees is seen as transforming current demographics and overthrowing existing social orders (i.e., Syrian workers competing in the low-wage economy while threatening potential future electoral divides, in the event of integration through marriage or naturalization).

What we conceptualized earlier as the workings of the mythological machine unwrapped a sequence of events that forced many communities to flee from their homes and neighborhoods and to seek refuge in areas where their community of belonging was a sectarian issue, in an imagined homogenous unity, or in a diasporic condition. A profound state-society transformation ensued. The mass movement of people across territories has had a structural effect. Those displaced within the borders of the nation-state redefine and reclaim its space through the foundation of new mythological communities, either coexisting with armed rebellions, or in the liminal space of survival as in Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen. Those displaced across international frontiers maintain a virtual link with their community, but effectively they belong to new liminal ones often patronized by hosting governments (Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey) or humanitarian organisations. Or in a gray zone of precarious informality. This activates the mythological machine, which then works toward dismantling the existing idea of nation-states drawn up by the victorious powers at the end of the First World War, itself the product of mythological geopolitics informed by Orientalist knowledge.

The idea of a nation-state built on societal diversity now is being replaced progressively with the notion of a sectarian or ethnic enclave that celebrates uniformity and homogeneity (hence readability) along the ideological lines traced by the mythological machine. This implies a redrafting of a new political identity map that exists simultaneously with the old cartography of colonial invention made of international state borders that remain hardly permeable to redrafting.

Hence, the Great Civil War has produced an epochal deterritorialization. The case of Syria speaks clearly: A country of twenty million people in 2009, 5 million – 25 percent – fled the country, while an additional 6.3 million people are internally displaced, living in temporary dwellings in safer areas near Syria's borders. According to estimates, 500,000 people have died since 2011.⁶³ Beyond this toll on human lives and physical economic infrastructure, the Syrian government and subnational military groups have used identity-based population displacements as a strategy of war. Despite the success of the regime in reconquering most Syrian territories, the state has disintegrated into multiple ethnic-religious enclaves, where Shias and Christians live in contiguity. For all those displaced beyond national borders, the likelihood to return eventually is linked to the regime staying in power and who controls their homes in towns of origin (similarly in Iraq, Libya and Yemen). The government also is

⁶³ UNHCR (2018) Syria Emergency. Available at <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/syria-emergency.html>, accessed August 25, 2020.

orchestrating a demographic shift by taking actions to tip the balance of power between the country's different ethnic groups in Assad's favor by blocking the return of Sunni refugees to areas of strategic importance. One important measure that threatens any Syrian who is not explicitly pro-Assad is property law (Law No. 10), which is meant to dispossess the majority of those who fled and/or are associated with anti-regime groups.⁶⁴ For many IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons) and those who remain refugees outside of Syria — mostly Sunnis — the requirement of establishing proof of ownership miles away from home is essentially infeasible. Even more unlikely is the prospect of receiving notification that their properties happen to fall under the government designation of a 'reconstruction' zone. The least realist expectation is the option of registration within large parts of Syria given that more than half of the total private properties within Syria either are unregistered or lacking documents of ownership, which have been destroyed or lost because of the war. The realities of property ownership in the post-war climate demonstrate the potential for the law to displace permanently those who already have been forced to flee the country once.

Where Are the People?

The Great Civil War has created *states without people*. These states lack the fundamental *demos* on which to re-enact political life and social organization. *Ademia*, the absence of demos, is ultimately the condition cropping out of a civil war fueled by the mythological machine amidst multidimensional displacement.⁶⁵ The category of 'the people' becomes an empty box used in bolstering state prerogatives. It is recognized only inasmuch as it contributes to the making of a state and its existential plans. The mythological machine has coded and recoded the meaning of people through the gateway of idealized, mythological communities, claiming their nation-states, not reclaiming citizenship. Citizenship itself becomes contested not as a bond between people living in a land and therefore as an organizational solution to life; instead, it becomes a non-historical bond legitimizing the mythological machine of blood and nation, and each group's role in the Great Civil War.

In these historical and symbolic conditions, states become empty boxes: the category and existence of 'people' is displaced along physical and ideational spaces. It is confined to a liminal condition, which compels people to search for and imagine a new home or a promised land, which becomes a mythological projection of a timeless memory. However, a home (*oikos*) differs from a *polis*: the latter is a community based on the civic and the social; the former instead needs to be homogenous, constituted by unpolitical elements, i.e. blood, family, religion, mythologies. A state without people is a state where there is no space and no ethical ground for the category of 'people' conceived in its unobstructed, open-ended non-definition. Governed by mythological thinking, mythological speak and mythological practice, the threshold between blood and politics, the house and the city, *oikos* and *polis*, is the new site of

⁶⁴ See Human Rights Watch (2018) Syria's New Property Law. Available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/29/qa-syrias-new-property-law>, accessed August 25, 2020.

⁶⁵ See Agamben, *Stasis*, p. 59. Mabon too uses *ademia*, though from a different theoretical angle; see S. Mabon (2017) Sovereignty, Bare Life and the Arab Uprisings, *Third World Quarterly* 38(8), pp. 1782–1799.

civil war over who belongs to the nation and who is an enemy to it. Within the scheme of this paradigm, the mythological machine reigns supreme.

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