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THE DIFFICULT COEXISTENCE IN EGYPT BETWEEN THE REGIME AND THE MUSLIM BROTHERS

The relationship between the Muslim Brothers and the Egyptian authorities (which, in this case, are represented by a military regime) has always been marked by a difficult coexistence, where times of crisis have been more frequent than times of reciprocal comprehension.

At the birth of the Confraternity in 1928, its founder, Skheykh Hassan al Banna, inspired by the ideology of moderate Sufism, gave the movement the same, moderate, characteristics.

The Confraternity was founded and spread in the 40's and 50's as an elitist movement that found its members among the higher-ranked employees and functionaries in the urban areas of Egypt. Only later will proselytism be extended to the middle class in rural areas.

There are, however, from the very beginning, two circumstances that are superimposed: officially, the movement is dedicated to a wide array of social activities that range from education to hospitals, assistance for derelicts, etc. (it is such parameters that allow the movement to find its social consensus), but at the same time, it has other, more political, goals. It is this second nature, that of spreading a 'politicized' Islam, that produces frictions with the governing authorities. In fact, the Brotherhood conceptually refutes the idea of a secular state.

The ideology that drives the political activity of the Muslim Brothers is that of fighting for a return to pure Islam (Salafism) by opposing everything that is not in line with the teachings of the Koran and of the Sunna; to pursue the islamization of governments in all countries by recurring to the methods that seem more fitting (including both legal and subversive means); to reinforce the social fabric for the religious education of the population; to achieve physical health (that's why the Brotherhood administers hospitals, gyms, health clinics); to promote scientific studies; to build economic structures for the benefit of the masses.

In practice – and to varying degrees – the Brotherhood aims at forming Islamic individuals in an Islamic society. On a higher level, they aim at creating Muslim states and then, progressively, the Caliphate (which means the unity of all states Muslim). The final goal – and a very ambitious one at that – is to mold a world guided by Islam. It is an international program that was, however, based on the premise that Egypt, where the Brotherhood originated, would be the first piece of the puzzle to fall into place.

The first difficulties originated in the year 1937, when the country was governed by king Faruq, who was left on the throne by the British after a period during which Egypt was a protectorate of the UK. In 1948 the movement was banished because, following the murder of Prime Minister Nuqrashi, they were accused of carrying out political terrorism. On February 12, 1949, Al Banna was murdered. Then, in 1952, the coup d'état of the

“Young officials” forced Faruq to abdicate. There followed a short period at the helm for General Mohammed Naguid, who was deposed by another General, Gamal Abdel Nasser, on the following year.

With Nasser in power, the tables are turned: the movement, which had previously been persecuted, is initially rehabilitated by Nasser. The peaceful coexistence is, however, short-lived: in 1954 the Muslim Brothers are accused to have ordained a plot to kill the President and are once again persecuted and arrested.

Then, in 1970, Nasser dies and is replaced by Anwar Sadat. And the tables are turned once more: in 1971, detained brothers are released and the leaders of the movement are allowed to carry out their activity once again. This new period of peace does not, however, budge the Confraternity from its strategic aims and claims. Within the movement, two juxtaposed currents emerge: one wants to continue the opposition against the regime by developing a 'political' Islam – with all of the subversive elements that this entails – while the other is willing to implement a collaboration with the regime by pursuing the aims of the movement within a legal framework.

But the mid-eastern events tilt the balance: Sadat wages another war against Israel; in 1975, he re-opens the Suez Canal – which had been closed since the six-day war. He signs the Camp David peace accords and visits Jerusalem.

Due to these peaceful initiatives, on October 6, 1981, Sadat is murdered by Islamic extremists, probably connected to the Brothers themselves.

The rise to power of yet another General, Hosni Mubarak, coincides with another wave of repression against the Brotherhood. The reign of Mubarak is a long one, 30 years during which the Movement is alternatively persecuted, then left alone. Periodically, its leaders are jailed, then released. The Movement is prohibited from carrying out official political activity, while the government closes an eye on individuals and formations that are notoriously tied to the Movement but do not profess that they are.

Then, in 2011, the Arab Spring comes along. This social upheaval doesn't see the Muslim Brothers in the front line, but allows them to come out in the open and ride the popular resentment. They are rehabilitated by the United States and manage to grab the popular consensus and power through their network of Mosques. They believe – erroneously – that the long span of military power is over and done with. Yet they are mistaken. When in power, they enact contradicting measures produced by an archaic vision of society. They do not liberalize or democratize society but rather try to impose their vision of the world onto others. The ingredients of their social recipe are religious obligations and impositions. They create discontent; they get into a collision course with the secular and illuminated part of the country; they get on the bad side of the Copt community (roughly 10% of the population of Egypt); they do not solve the economic woes of the poorer part of the country. In fact, they give the military the opportunity to ride the social malcontent – this time against them – generated by the population's worsening conditions.

And this time around their defeat is total. The heavy hand of General Al Sisi's repression brings about the complete destruction of the Movement's structures. The Murshad Alam (the Supreme Guide) Mohammed Badie is arrested, together with the most important members of the organization: the 80 members of the “Majlis al Shura”, or Consultative Assembly, the umbrella-secretariat for all the articulations of the Movement such as its proselytism (within the army, families, unions, students, public administration, etc.), its propaganda (publications, newspapers, magazines) and its social services. In addition, the

15 members of the Political Directorate (Maktab al Irshad) are also killed, jailed or put on the run. The Egyptian military tribunals have already passed hundreds of death sentences (about 10 of which have already been carried out). Badie himself has already been slapped with 4 life sentences and a capital sentence for inciting violence during the demonstrations following the military coup d'état in the region of Suez.

The deposed President Mohammed Morsi, who was ousted by Al Sisi, was also jailed and is currently standing trial for a myriad of crimes: inciting to kill demonstrators; espionage in favor of armed foreign factions (Hezbollah, Hamas and the Iranian Guardians of the Revolution) with whom Morsi would have elaborated terrorist conspiracies; espionage in favor of other countries (Qatar, that would have received "sensible" documents from Morsi); treason; insulting the judicial system; tax fraud with regards to the social and economic program approved during his presidency (the so-called "Nhada Project" or "Renaissance Project"); escaping from prison (during the revolution in 2011) and the consequent accessory to murder charge (some of the prison guards were killed). Mohammed Morsi has already been sentenced to 20 years in prison and to capital punishment, but other trials against him are still on-going.

In a way, Morsi embodies the story of the relationship between the Brotherhood and the regime: he was in parliament from 2002 to 2005 as an independent; he has already been a client of the Egyptian prisons during Mubarak's reign, in 2006 and in 2011 (not to mention various arrests and subsequent releases); then he became President and then prisoner again.

In practice, from June 24, 2012, the day of Morsi's election to the Presidency of the Republic with 51,73% of the votes, until July 3, 2013, when he was ousted by the military, the parentheses in power of the Brotherhood and of its party 'Justice and Liberty', has been inexorably exhausted. This was not due solely to Al Sisi's military coup, but to the failure of the Brotherhood's political, social and economic policies.

Thus the hands of time are back at their starting point, with the Muslim Brothers being arrested and persecuted again, only this time in a more systematic and brutal manner. Morsi falls, Mubarak is released: the course and recourse of history.

On December 25, 2013, the Muslim Brothers have been included in Egypt's list of terrorist organizations. Their properties and financial assets have been seized. On the past 21st of February, Hamas was also banished by a similar government measure.

The Muslim Brothers have thus returned underground, with all that which follows such condition. At a time when the Middle East is infested with terrorism and religious radicalism, the dropping out of the Brotherhood from the "legal" political scene doesn't only imply changes in Egypt's internal questions, but also casts dark shadows over the future of the organization at an international level.

Egypt has a historical tradition of giving birth to – apart from the Muslim Brothers – other, more radical groups such as al Gama'a Islamiyah ("The Islamic Group") and the Egyptian Jihad Islamiyah. These groups were founded in the 70's when the Brotherhood had renounced subversive activities. The two aforementioned organizations are affiliates of al Qaeda. Egyptian national Ayman Zawahiri, who took over al Qaeda after the killing of Osama bin Laden, has been a member of both organizations.

Egypt has been a fertile ground for important figures in the field of radical Islamic culture such as Sayyid Qutb, also a member of the Brotherhood, who was hanged by the regime

on August 29, 1966. This serves to show that an 'underground' brotherhood is a potential threat not only for Egypt but for the entire Muslim world. The Movement is one of the most important associations in the Arab and Muslim world, where it has millions of adepts coming from every social echelon. It is an organization that has branches in over 70 countries and that administers an enormous amount of money, mostly the fruit of donations. The Brotherhood administers its wealth through a network of its own banks (such as Taqwa Bank) that operate throughout the globe, including Europe, and through a number of funds that are scattered in various tax heavens (Bhamas, Switzerland, Lichtenstein). The Brotherhood also owns magazines, publications, websites and every other media instrument useful for proselytism, without having to recur to the publicized violence of the ISIS, and this makes it more dangerous than the ISIS itself.

Presently, the Brotherhood – or rather, those that have escaped arrest – is going through an inner metamorphosis; it is turning into something more radical. The old leaders have been ousted/arrested/killed/made to flee and the new generations are directing the mounting resentment and violence towards the Egyptian authorities. And, in so doing, they are finding support – not only political and economic – in countries like Turkey and Qatar.

It is a crawling war in which – during the past two years – the regime has arrested over 40.000 individuals; roughly 2000 have been murdered in clashes and terrorist attacks; the vanishing of prisoners and torture is systematic and the hundreds of death sentences do not seem to slow the spiral of violence.

If, on the one side, there is an attempt to use repression to destroy one of the world's most important political/religious organizations, on the other side there is a radical front that is forming in Egypt. A front that is subversive and armed, and which sees the Muslim Brothers growing and tying knots with other organizations against the military regime, even with the Beit al Maqdess, who are in turn affiliated to the ISIS. The latest attacks in the Sinai and in Cairo are proof of it.

THE VATICAN AND THE LONG ROAD TOWARDS A PALESTINIAN STATE

There are two prevailing souls in the Palestinian world at present: one incline to dialogue represented by the National Palestinian Authority (ANP) based in Ramallah, and its extremist counterpart embodied by Hamas and the Islamic Jihad in Gaza. The future of the Palestinians will be determined by the outcome of the struggle between such alternative visions of the future relationship with Israel. Whether it will be war or talks will depend on whether the frustrations accumulated in over 60 years will prevail over a peaceful solution. Otherwise it will be conflict, possibly a mass struggle (an Intifada), that will cause yet more, albeit disproportionately, deaths and suffering in both Palestinians and Israelis.

It is within this context that we have to evaluate the Vatican's decision to recognize the State of Palestine. A step that reinforces the political stance and international credibility of the ANP's current president, Abu Mazen, aka Mahmoud Abbas, as opposed to Khaled Meshal and Ismail Haniyeh from Hamas. The initiative is even more important if we consider that Israel has just voted in favor of the nth government ruled by Benjamin Netanyahu, whose approach is against any negotiated solution. The Israeli PM declared during his electoral campaign that he will never allow the creation of a Palestinian State, that Jerusalem is the capital of the Jewish State (although 37% of the population is Palestinian) and approved the construction of 900 homes for settlers in Eastern Jerusalem as the first act of his new government.

Given such a stance, any peaceful negotiation will be possible solely if the Palestinians seeking a dialogue, led by the ANP, will be able to produce tangible results. The Vatican's initiative helps in this precise direction although they were not the first ones to take such a step. In November 2012 the UN's General Assembly approved Resolution 67/19 that granted Palestine a "non-member observer status", just like the Holy See, that voted in favor.

The Vatican has now moved one more step ahead and signed a direct and global recognition of Palestine as a State whose legitimate representative is President Abu Mazen. By cutting Hamas out of the equation, Pope Francis is trying to foster a return to dialogue between the parties as underlined by his May 2014 visit to Jordan, West Bank and Israel. Even during that trip Mahmoud Abbas had been labeled by the Pontiff as "President" of the Palestinian "State". The Pope's activism did not stop there. In June 2014 he invited Abu Mazen and Shimon Peres to Rome. A year before that a delegation from the Vatican had met with the PLO to discuss the status of the Catholic church. Pope Francis is continuing along the lines of a long standing relationship between the Vatican and the Palestinians that started back in 1994 and became official through the PLO in 2000. The entente between the Holy See and Palestine includes issues of religious freedom, jurisdiction, properties and status of the personnel employed by the Catholic Church for a total of 69 articles.

The biggest step is, of course, the signature of an agreement between the Vatican and Palestine, not just the PLO. The two sides had initially agreed to be represented by an envoy and not an ambassador. But this is a merely formal detail and such a distinction has no meaning in the Holy See's diplomatic list. Although not officially, a Palestinian

diplomatic representation has been deployed at the Vatican for years. The latest ambassador appointed by Abu Mazen in August 2013 is Issa Kassissieh, a Greek Orthodox, while a Chargé d'Affaires named Ammar Nasnas has been taking care of the Rome office for quite some time. The Apostolic Nuncio in Jerusalem, instead, represents the Holy See in Palestine. In light of the recent clashes in the Occupied Territories, the Vatican has taken yet one more step: it has granted the Palestinians a building where to host their embassy right in front of the Sant'Anna gate that leads inside the Holy See. Such an initiative has a precise political meaning.

The Pope's activism is not simply a reflection of his attention for the marginalized (as are his condemnations of the Armenian genocide and capitalism) or his predilection for peace (as in Cuba or against an armed intervention in Syria), but a strategy targeted at the Middle East to protect the Christians. The PLO's secular characteristics help in this direction.

Since the days of Yasser Arafat the PLO has paid a lot of attention to its christian minority, as the presence of an Anglican Bishop, Eli Khoury, in the Executive Council of the organization and that of a Catholic Priest, Abuna Ibrahim Ayad, in Fatah's Central Committee show. The circumstance is particularly relevant if we consider that the PLO is a majority muslim, secular, and marxist (at least in the past) movement where Christians represent a mere 8% of the people. Yet, Christians have a strong marxist tradition in the Middle East ever since the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine led by George Habash. Arafat loved repeating that there can be no Palestine without the Christians.

The Vatican is not the first country to recognized Palestine as a state. Over 100 nations have already done so: all South America (with the exception of Colombia and Panama), Africa (except Cameroon and Eritrea), a good part of Asia and Eastern Europe. In Western Europe only Sweden has granted its recognition to Palestine, whilst both the British and Italian Parliaments have approved motions that mandate their governments to proceed in this direction. The European Parliament has done the same in December 2014. On the other hand, the United States, although indirectly, expressed their support for the national unity government formed by the PLO and Hamas, although the latter is still a considered a terrorist organization, in June 2014.

Abu Mazen's diplomatic offensive goes beyond the Vatican's recognition and a complaint filed against Israel for crimes against the Palestinian people at the International Criminal Court after it became the 123rd member of the institution on April 15, 2015. Yet, the failure of the national unity government with Hamas is hindering such attempts. Abu Mazen was elected in 2005 with a 4 years mandate, but no elections were held ever since.

The Palestinian diaspora scattered across the world counts 12 million people. 2.8 million live in the West Bank, 1.8 million in Gaza and 4.6 million in the Occupied Territories (43% of whom are refugees), while the rest is abroad. Each of these communities suffers in the hope of a Palestinian state. Those that live in Gaza – the city with the highest population density in the globe and under embargo by Israel – or in one of the 31 refugee camps in Syria, Lebanon or Israel or that are subject to abuse and discrimination in the Occupied

Territories could be more inclined to radicalism. And they are the numeric majority of Palestinians.

In the statistics of feelings and resentment the Israelis also have to be taken into account. Their perception with regard to the creation of a Palestinian state is one of fear. They fear for their security, isolated in a hostile region and with a tragic past made of holocausts, persecutions and discriminations behind them. The Jewish diaspora has always been against each and everyone. They were the nomadic people in search of the promised land, a dream that came true in Palestine. This should help them understand how their counterparts feel now, but this story has seen so many deaths, witnessed too much blood to candidly drift towards a peaceful resolution. Palestinians and Israelis did not learn from their past, they are influenced by it. The sole hope lies in the spirit of the new generations of both peoples, those seeking a better future without having to look back. It is a long road that has no alternatives. The end lies where the Jewish Aliyah (the return to the promised land) meets, in peace, the Nakba (the 1948 exodus and catastrophic day) of the Palestinians.

SULTAN QABOOS'S SILENT DIPLOMACY

There is only one country in the entire Middle East that is not involved in conspiring or fighting and that is Oman. International observers often do not perceive this circumstance, too busy as they are in looking at the bloody events across the region. But if tomorrow you had to look for a country capable of setting up a negotiation, an informal facilitator, only Oman could be capable of doing so. This is the policy that Sultan Qaboos bin Said al Said and the Ibadis, the Islamic sect under his rule, have carried out since 1970, when he defenestrated his father.

The Ibadi vision is imbued with tolerance and moderation and is dedicated to social good. The sect is somewhere in between Sunnis and Shia and this has aided the Sultan in keeping at large from the political and religious struggles undermining the Arabian Peninsula. Along such a religious attitude, there is also the peculiar culture and tradition of Oman: a country of seafarers, explorers open to the outside world and very distant from the tribal and beduin societies of the other Arab people in the area.

This is one of the reasons why Qaboos has always offered his wisdom and maintained good relations with all the actors in the region. During his 35 years of reign, the Sultan has fared his country from the Middle Ages to the modern era without the frictions and uprisings that such a social process usually carries with it.

The role in the nuclear deal

The recent deal signed by Iran and the United States on Tehran's nuclear program is in good portion the result of the Omani secret mediation that, particularly during the early stages of the negotiations, helped overcome the diffidence that froze any progress. Even though the official multinational talks started in 2014, the first secret contacts between Iran and the United States date back to 2011. Although their results were modest, they allowed for the first hurdles between the two countries to be overcome. At that time Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was Iran's Prime Minister and Ali Akbar Salehi its Foreign Minister. The Supreme Guide Ayatollah Khamenei had given his blessing to the opening of the talks.

A year later, in July 2012, another preparatory round was held in Muscat between two delegations. The Americans were represented by Jake Sullivan from the State Department and Puneet Talwar from the National Security Council, while the Iranian head of delegation was Saade Jalili. After an interruption in the Autumn of 2012 due to the US presidential elections that confirmed Barack Obama in office, a new round of secret talks was held in March 2013. This time around the delegations had a higher profile: the Deputy Secretary of State, William Burns, and the Deputy Iranian Foreign Minister, Ali Ashgar Khaji. These preliminary negotiations aimed at exploring the room for a deal.

A second pause was necessary during the Iranian elections in the summer of 2013 that ended up in the appointment of Hassan Rouhani as PM and Jawad Zarif as Minister of Foreign Affairs. Sultan Qaboos's visit to Tehran in August 2013 was targeted at giving the final boost to the negotiations between Iran and US.

This means that before the multinational talks kicked off, several issues had already been ironed out during the secret talks hosted by Oman. And this is thanks to the services of Sultan Qaboos. This also implies that both parties have always been eager to finding a solution and that once Rouhani came to power, all he had to do was follow a negotiated track that had already been defined prior to his appointment.

The role in the Syrian crisis

Oman has also tried to negotiate in the Syrian crisis. The evidence to this is the visit paid by the Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Walid Moallem, in Muscat in August 2015 following an invitation by Qaboos. The Sultan expressed his willingness to help find a negotiated solution to the war. The event is even more politically relevant if we consider that that was the first visit by a Syrian minister in a country of the Gulf since the outbreak of the civil war in 2011.

Qaboos was able to offer a diplomatic exit route to the conflict both because of his reputation and the trust conferred to his role. Furthermore, Oman has kept a different stance from the other countries member of the Gulf Cooperation Council. It has never taken position in the sectarian clashes between Sunni and Shia, it has never supplied any party with weapons and has only provided humanitarian aid. The Omani stance on the Syrian crisis was outlined back in October 2012 with a public statement by the reign's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Yusef Alawi. Furthermore, Qaboos has never interrupted the diplomatic relations with Damascus despite voting in favor of Syria's suspension from the Arab League in November 2011.

We don't know whether this initiative will have a follow up as the Syrian crisis is more and more entangled now that the Russians have entered the equation. That said, Oman will be a safe harbour for discreet talks and if international diplomacy wishes to seek a negotiated exit strategy.

The role in the Yemeni crisis

Loyal to its neutral policy of non-interference, Oman has refused to participate in the Saudi military invasion of Yemen to crush the Houthis. It was a matter of political coherence, but also an issue of not meddling with a destabilized neighboring country that could backfire with yet more instability, terrorism and so forth.

Also in this case, in May 2015 and on American request, Oman hosted a meeting between a US delegation and the Houthis to negotiate a cease fire and a solution to the armed conflict. All this was made possible because during the 1994 was between North and South Yemen Oman had hosted peace talks. Before then, back in 1985, Muscat had opened its relations with the Soviet Union.

A constant mediation role

It is almost difficult to find a crisis in the Middle East, North Africa or in Eurasia that has not seen Oman play the moderator or favor a mediation. The 1978 Camp David agreement and the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel was supported and encouraged by Oman

when all other Arab countries were against it. A year later, Qaboos was the sole opponent of the expulsion of Egypt from the Arab League. It is thus not a surprise that Oman and Israel have direct, but not official contacts since 1994 when Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister, Yossi Beilin, visited Muscat. Until 2000 there were also respective commercial offices in both countries.

The relationship between Iran and Oman has always been a good one. It was so during the days of the Shah – who helped Qaboos quell the rebellion in Dhofar – and they continued to be fine when Khomeini took over in 1979. Even then, several Arab countries had broken their diplomatic ties with Teheran, but not Oman. And Qaboos has always prevented the Gulf Cooperation Council from turning into an anti-Iranian military and political alliance.

Oman has tried to mediate between India and Pakistan in 1985 and between Qatar and Bahrein in 1986. Through one of its diplomats, Qaboos had brought Iran and Iraq to the negotiating table in 1987 during the war, pushed Teheran to accept a UN Resolution and then favored a rapprochement between Iran and the United States. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990, Oman condemned the attack, but did not cut its diplomatic ties with Baghdad, but instead tried to negotiate a diplomatic solution prior to the American intervention. The then Iraqi Minister of Foreign Affairs, Tareq Aziz, flew to Muscat to talk with Qaboos three months after the invasion of Kuwait and two months before the outbreak of the First Gulf War.

Oman has also discreetly negotiated a number of prisoner swaps or liberations: in 2011 and 2012 it facilitated the freeing of three American tourists that had entered Iran, while in 2013 it successfully obtained the liberation of an Iranian diplomat held in the UK for 5 years and of another Iranian scientist detained in the US. It was Oman that took care of the United Kingdom's diplomatic relations in Iran when London didn't have an embassy in Teheran.

An independent and moderate foreign policy

Omani foreign policy, its independence, its innate tendency for negotiations and diplomatic solutions was possible solely because the stability of the sultanate is not guaranteed by regional alliances, but by the military and political support granted by both the United States and Great Britain. A support that is also linked to Oman's strategic position on the Strait of Hormuz where a third of the world's oil production transits via sea. This circumstance has granted Oman the possibility of keeping at large from the pressure and tension in the region.

The legitimate will to survive of a country of 3.5 million people has not prevented Oman from taking stances that went against some of the parties it was mediating for. The most blatant example is the Omani position against the Iranian claims of three island in the Gulf – Abu Mousa, Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb – that belong to the United Arab Emirates.

A similar independence is shown with regard to the GCC: the Omani Ramadan begins one day after the Saudi one (in a reminder that the Saudis don't rule over Muslims), the country

has not adhered to the monetary union (to elude Saudi financial supremacy), and Muscat was against both the sending of troops in Yemen and in Bahrein, where a Sunni minority rules over a Shia majority.

Oman's true problem is its future stability. Sultan Qaboos is 75 years old and has no heirs to hand his throne over to. There is no assurance that his wisdom, his opposition to armed interventions, his continuous research for dialogue, his strong independence from regional affairs will continue once a successor is in place. His health is starting to falter after eight months spent in Germany for some unspecified medical treatment. Rest assured that if the Middle East had seen more leaders like Sultan Qaboos there wouldn't be all the conflicts, sectarian violence and wars that are staining with blood the entire Middle East.