

Editorial

West, East and the “Middle” East: Critical Notes about the Ukrainian and Syrian Conflicts

Babak Rezvani

We are happy to announce the second issue of our journal this year. We will continue to refer to and debate on the latest developments in the still nascent field of ethnogeopolitics (as we did in the journal's first issues), in our editorials and in contributions by other scholars.

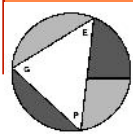
Indeed, we have entered our third year of professional existence in a world full of bloody conflicts. These conflicts are very unfortunate and heartbreaking and call for thorough analysis and immediate action. As I have indicated in the introduction to the Editorial by our Executive Editor in the previous issue, these three years the world has provided us with many examples of why ethnogeopolitics is important as a discipline. Of course it is unfortunate that the many conflicts—e.g. in Ukraine, Sudan, Yemen, Syria and Iraq—have occurred, but nevertheless their occurrence is another indication of the relevance and necessity of the study of ethnogeopolitics in current world affairs.

The fact that the Ukrainian crisis is still not fully understood is yet another indication of the negligence of the ethnogeopolitical reality in many parts of the world. Still, more than one year after the Malaysian airliner MH17 was shot down and killed all 298 passengers on board, the Netherlands, the country of origin of the vast majority of the fatalities, has no clear and definite answer at this stage to (all) the causes of the disaster, nor does it have any real independent policy towards the parties of conflict and the alleged culprits.

One thing at least is not contested by anyone involved, however: flying with a civilian aircraft over the conflict zone in eastern Ukraine at the time was very unwise. Actually, flying over any conflict zone anywhere is very unwise—and should never be repeated, ever again.

Another conflict which has called a lot of attention and yet is clouded with different types of fallacies is the conflict in Syria. Before I proceed, let me make it absolutely clear that I believe that there are 'good guys' and 'bad guys' among members of each ethnic, confessional or national group in Syria—indeed among any such domestic and foreign groups in any country ravaged by conflict.

There are good and evil Syrians, Iraqis, Russians, Dutch, Germans, Hungarians, whoever. And even if some groups can be considered 'bad' in some instances and times, they might not be or should not be considered thus in others. Generally, the social and behavior of peoples in such conflicts and crises should be analyzed and understood, as much as those of states and other actors.



Recently, Russia has received much international attention and scrutiny. The critiques on Russia might be justifiable in one case and not in another, however. It should not depend on the country but on its policies. Even if Russia is an imperialist power and behaves imperialistically in conflict areas like that in the Ukraine, still its intervention in Syria and fight against ISIS in itself might be a good thing.

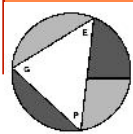
Much the same can be said of the United States with their ill-considered and ill-fated interventions in Iraq and elsewhere—and the European Union is not blameless in the Ukraine either. Still, blaming the West for all the ills in the world, is unjust, reductionist and unidimensional. Countries implement multiple policies, about multiple issues and in multiple fields, which may even be inconsistent and contradictory with each other.

If Russia should not attack other rebel groups in Syria, the United States and other actors need to prove that these groups are neither jihadist (or extremist in any other sense) nor terrorist (or brutal in any other sense), and are genuinely willing to negotiate with Syria's current regime to put an end to the fighting and bloodletting and commence a true peace and reconciliation process (of course, also Russia needs to convincingly show that it is exclusively or primarily targeting only ISIS or more broadly the most terrorist, extremist, destabilizing and intransigent rebel forces).

The first priority in the Syrian conflict, and for that matter in any other bloody conflict, is putting an end to the bloodshed, and commence a true peace and reconciliation process. The question of who did what to whom in Syria and who should face the moral and legal consequences for it, can always be determined by court cases—by domestic and/or international tribunals—after the war. And perhaps a truth and reconciliation commission might be a good thing for Syria, like the one that has been so crucial to the relative peace and stability in post-Apartheid South Africa.

However, it is not justified for any reason or in any circumstance—like in a hearing before a truth commission—to say that there are or have been good or bad terrorists. An ISIS terrorist may be able to get overwhelmed by a Bollywood movie and even shed a tear, yet if he or she deliberately chooses to enslave, rape and kill people, he or she cannot be called a good, virtuous person, that is to say a person that commits acts that are in any way laudable or defensible. Ultimately, not persons or personalities as such but their ideologies, deeds and attitudes should form the basis of our judgments.

Therefore, governments, organized non-state actors and indeed private persons are responsible and accountable for their deeds. Circumstances like repression, discrimination and personal revenge may be understandable and even be considered extenuating circumstances for some manifestations of terrorism and other kinds of brutalities. These causes, conditions and dynamics need to be understood and analyzed. However, these factors can never be used to justify brutalities that arguably, in the final analysis, are considered immoral and cruel among any 'good' people in any culture and society—whatever religious and secular ideologies might disfigure or seek to ignore and destroy these



humane values. Therefore, universal values are not a prerogative of the West. All too often, the West is hypocritical in that regard.

The Syrian conflict has caused a huge flow of refugees which may have complications for the security and social situations in the hosting countries. I intend to write more elaborately on this in the near future. For now, I want to refer to and comment on the existing popular sentiments in Europe about these refugees.

These refugees have gone through extreme hardships in their own country and through inhumane ordeals in certain countries en route to their preferred destinations. Indeed, it is sad and inhumane to claim defending the “sacred Christian soil” against the Muslims by kicking and beating a little girl and a father carrying a child. Still, ironically many of these refugees are Christians. And what is more “European” than voting with their feet for democracy and freedom?

Whereas most West governments are claiming and declaring to be ready to adopt these refugees, certain East and Central European countries impede their access to the West. Although many people in the Western (and for that matter also in Central and Eastern) Europe countries welcomed the refugees, still many anti-refugee sentiments exist.

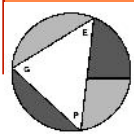
To name but one disturbing example, reports that Syrian and other refugees from the Middle East having just arrived in Europe are forced to eat un-halal food is quite inhumane and incredibly humiliating to say the least. These reports, if true, describe situations that violate the basic rights of freedom of thought and religion and thereby violate human dignity. Actually, it effectively amounts to rape if one considers the trauma it might bring among the refugees, among pious Muslims in particular.

Think of how the many vegetarians and vegans in ‘our’ Western societies would feel if they happen to be starving and ‘over there’—and only given meat (of whatever kind) and nothing else for their survival.

There are people claiming that these refugees are too greedy and demanding and they should adapt to “our” (read the majority’s) culture. And many of these people claim not to be racists. I cannot judge about individual people, but there seems to be an undeniable, widespread racism in many countries. If the economic toll were the main issue, then why are these people less concerned about the flow of East European migrants to their societies?

Electoral results show that the anti-immigrant parties usually have more electoral support when they campaign against Muslim migrants from beyond Europe than against East European ones, despite the latter having been arriving in far larger numbers.

Finally, the tendency among many Western news agencies and even governments to use the label “Islamic State” for the extremist movement concerned, instead of the cumbersome and lesser-known yet more precise abbreviations of “ISIS” or “ISIL”, is very unwise given the



widespread Islamophobia and Islamic radicalism in many Western countries. A more thoughtful “ethnogeopolitical” perspective would dictate otherwise. Consequently, people should use the terms ‘ISIS’ or ‘ISIL’, rather than ‘IS’ or ‘Islamic State’, even if they do not know the precise meanings of these acronyms.

Incidentally, France, most Arab countries and most other ISIS opponents in the region also derogatively call the movement “DAESH”, by using a rough Arabic acronym-equivalent for ISIS/ISIL. Accidentally or deliberately, ‘Daesh’ resembles the Arabic term ‘Dāhis’ for “felon (and dust)”.

I hope to be able to write more elaborately about the aforementioned phenomena in the next issues of our journal.

Babak Rezvani, Editor-in-Chief Amsterdam/Tblisi, October 2015

I wish to sincerely thank Caspar ten Dam, our Executive Editor, for taking care of our journal in these last three years. This editorial has been written in close consultation with him.

NB: do you have any comments on the Editorial? Please send these to info@ethnogeopolitics.org, or through the contact form at www.ethnogeopolitics.org.