

Interview

Miklós Maróth,
Lecturer, oriental and classical scholar

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Introduction: In spring, 2016, the ICRP conducted an interview with Miklós Maróth, university lecturer, oriental and classical scholar, former Vice President of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences about the relation of religious and ethnic communities in the Middle East with a special focus on the Syrian Civil War. He gave us his insights of the mentioned topics by pointing out the main features of diverse political paradigms as well as the shading light on the causes and consequences of current migration trends affecting the region. Therefore the interview focused on the role of terrorist groups, Middle Eastern political perspectives about the West and diverse public opinion based on religious differences.

Could you speak about the characteristics of Christian-Muslim mixed societies? Are these states tolerant of different religions? How do these societies live together?

This is a very difficult and complicated question, which is rather hard to answer. There is a theoretical and a practical side. Theoretically, Islam is very tolerant about the religions of the books (Christianity and Judaism). They are protected in certain questions: theoretically they can freely practice their religion as long as they comply with their obligations for the community and regularly pay a tax which reminds them that they are not equal. Against this

there is the practice, which seems to forget about this theoretical regulation of Islam. For example when the Umayyad caliphate was established in Damascus, most of the population was Christian – now only 14% of the population in Syria is Christian and the recent events are reducing this rate. So theoretically the very tolerant Islam liquidates Christian minorities, except Egypt, where the 2 million Coptic Christians would be impossible to eliminate. Objectively I would like to mention the Christian minority in Iraq, which is actually 2 million people. They were an ethnic group as well – the so-called Assyrians – who were Christians and spoke a variant of the Syriac language. When the Americans arrived in Iraq with democracy, the new situation created an opportunity for different groups to attack the Christian minority – for example to blow up a church with believers inside. So by this time this minority reduced from 2 million to 200 thousand people, who are leaving their hometowns continuously and they are unable to maintain and reproduce on their own. It means that we lost a whole nation and a language. The action of the Islamic State is against the regulations of Islam which does not allow selling Christian women into slavery and killing men. There is an individual interpretation of Islam within the IS which made them responsible for the liquidation of the Christians in the Middle East, but I have to mention the actions of the Sunni population as well – for example the Iraqi Christians' case. Besides the tolerance the Islamic world is rather individual: in their territory the old Christian churches can be maintained, but new ones are forbidden to be built. Meanwhile the Muslims want to build new mosques in Christian Europe. For example Saudi Arabia offered to build 1,500 new mosques in Europe as a solution for migration, while also making a resolution to liquidate the old Christian churches in Saudi Arabia. So the relationship of the Christian-Muslim world is rather asymmetric. Besides the Christian world lives in secular states, so the politics cannot influence the religious questions, cannot make any harm to Muslims. However in the Islamic world the religion and the politics are connected and Islamic states can liquidate Christian minorities very easily. I must add the fact the secular states in the Middle East, like Syria (where the recent situation was generated from outside, because it is not internally generated), where the governing Alawite minority, the 10% of the population cooperated with the 14% Christian minority was interested in peace between religions. Since the so-called Syrian "democratic" forces appeared, both Shiite and Christian minorities have been under attack with the help of the West.

What do you think, is there any possibility for rapprochement? Will there ever be a time in which religious differences are put aside?

It is not the question of the individual decision of the emperors, this is a religious block – the old churches can be restored, new ones are not allowed to be built. Besides, the first disruption of Islam was 1400 years before, so they had three times more to soften than Christianity. And the crisis is deeper and deeper – among their own groups as well – so I do not think so they would let up.

What would you say is the reason for the situation's recent escalation in tension? How did the war develop?

In every country the situation is different. I have already said many times and at many places that I am convinced, this territory is overpopulated. I have mentioned many times, while the population of Europe in the last 100 years (1915–2015) had increased by 20% and is now starting to decrease, while the population of the Middle East has grown nine times. Every territory has its tenability. It means that only a limited quantity of food can be produced – and not more. In case of overpopulation the wandering will start. I would like to state that one person consumes 200 litres of water per day (including the irrigation of the plants and drinking water to the animals and serving for his nourishment) – which is rather hard in a desert area. So the Islamic World cannot keep up with the overpopulation. So the Arab Spring, which concentrated in Europe around the shawl, that riot started and women emancipated, is a tremendous mistake: these were the premonitory signs of the hunger revolt – a hunger revolt, which concerned people waiting to the visa at the European embassies 20 years ago. During the Arab Spring the European states “took advantage” of the riot – for example before the Arab Spring Gadhafi were to be honoured, but then left and put away. There is a report of Gadhafi, he said that “you (European politicians) are idiots, because you ruin the wall, which saved you” – so that happened: mass of refugees are arriving to Italy from Libya. The situation in Syria is similar. The king of Jordan said years ago that as a result of the international interventions a “Shiite crescent” had been created (Iran traditionally Shiite, in Iraq the government is Shiite, just like in Syria and in Lebanon the Shiites are in majority already). This Shiite crescent made Israel and its allies very nervous. They realised that Syria was the weakest point in the crescent, where the government was run by the Shiite minority. Then the Sunni states, (Saudi Arabia and Qatar) joined the Western states against

Bashar al-Assad – without taking a single view on Libya, where Gadhafi was sent away and the state was in total chaos. Now in Syria a similar chaotic situation is underway. None of the European states (the protagonists of democracy) could understand that still after five years Syria did not become a second Libya, because most of the population supports Bashar al-Assad. The situation is further complicated with the role of Russia. The political influence of Russia prevails via the orthodox Christian religion. During the Soviet Union the leaders of the Marxist parties in the Middle East were orthodox Christians. And now Putin intervened by the side of the Shiite government, because they formed coalition with the Christians, meanwhile Russia is interested in saving its port, base and influence. Russia has a traditional role and an actual political interest. Now we are talking about world politics. I have emphasised many times that the 70 years of peace in Europe is thanks to the export of wars to the East. For example, in Ukraine the West and Russia are opponents – but they paid attention not to involve their own militaries, only the “deputies” – kind of a proxy-war. But in the East, in Syria they met personally – there were both the Americans and the Russians. There was a distinct opportunity to start the 3rd World War. Fortunately, their common sense won, and they agreed about the next steps against the IS. Now I would like to parenthesise that the soldiers of IS do not only own American arms, because they were trained and then changed sides with the guns. However, in 2015 two English airplanes were shot down while taking ammunition to the Islamic State and the Americans dropped ammunition into Kurdistan, but “somehow”, all of them fell into the territory of IS. Besides the most important ally of the US, Turkey – owning the second strongest army in NATO – was not able to close the borders. Some international adventurers are trading in these borders with oil and getting the ammunition continuously. The actions of the US and Turkey is rather two-faced: on the one hand they fight against the IS actively but on the other they support them in secret. Not to mention that the American bombings made less loss during 2 years than the Russians in the first week. Then the European Parliament also wrote a resolution which says that the Syrian refugees fled because of Bashar al-Assad, not because of the IS – meanwhile the fact is that from the IS’s territory many thousands of people refuged to al-Assad’s territory. So Europe reneges on itself or the politicians are lying. So the Western and the Sunni countries say that they fight against the IS, while they are supporting them. The war against the IS is the clash of Christianity and Islam as well – but an Islam, which does not follow the rules of the Islam.

What is Syrian public opinion about the West's involvement in the war-zone?

Actually in the 1950s the American ambassador visited Najaf at the Shiite Science Centre, when the Shiite leader told him about the mistakes of the US – the crisis in Iran, when US forces dismissed the elected officials by the rule of law prime minister (because he nationalised the Iranian oil field owned by a British company). Since then they have made bigger and bigger mistakes. And when I talk about the export of European wars to the Middle East, I mean the US does it as well. Then they want to teach them democracy, while their political tradition is different and not capable of this. Bashar al-Assad is thought to democracy leading a secular state and cooperating with Saudi Arabia, which is a non-democratic state. I am saying, the people also know that it is not the question of the name. It is the question of money and material things. And when the people feel that they are sermonised they cannot esteem the power. If you would see how a non-democratic leader from the Middle East, who was hated by his own country, was heralded in Asia – as a hero. This is their opinion of the European policy, not only in the Middle East, but in a much wider circle.

In your opinion, would the situation be better if the public could decide by themselves with less Western pressure?

Certainly it would be better, but you know, since the 19th century the Europeans have always wanted to make everyone civilised. And if they cannot do it by words, they would do it with guns. This is another question that all these attempts end in tragedy again and again. My favourite example, when the ancient Romans were at the border of Iberia and they did not want to occupy it – why would they need another territory? But as they saw how the aristocrats dealt with their slaves there, they had to go in. Europe always pretends to be fighting for something that is a moral value. The people have to take it, whether they need it or not. In Iraq during the Arab Spring 17 slogans were sounded, which started as “death on democracy, which...” referring to the democracy which was imported by the US. My Syrian friends told me that a politician, who has a high opinion of himself, must avoid the use of the word “democracy”. Now we always bring to book for democracy to the system built in the power of one person. In the Islamic World one person is responsible to the God. The Prophet said that the good emperor is good for himself and good for his people, the bad emperor is bad for himself but good for his people. Or, it is better to live 40 years under a tyrant, then one day without an emperor. This structure comes from Byzantium –explains Putin’s

autocratic style, while he follows the Byzantine political tradition. In this system the *auctoritas* and the *potestas* are united in one person – the leading of the religious and the secular power are joined in one hand. And the ruler's prior duty is to save Islam and the Islamic way of life. Until the people can live by their own safe by the rules of the Islam, they will not riot against their leaders. The only case of riot is the corruption, but not in the Western meaning. This means the waste of the relations, when the livelihood and life becomes insecure. And guess what the solution is? Back to Islam. If you take a look, the leaders were sent during the Arab Spring because of corruption. And the aftermath was the return to Islam – to a more radical Islam.

Is there any information about the equipment facilities of the terrorist groups? Are their resources calculable?

You used a word, the terrorist, which has not been defined. The Arab states have asked the international organisations a number of times in the previous peace period to define terrorism. It is important, because there are international agreements about that every nation can use any device to save their own freedom. In this point of view the Palestinians have the right to use every device for sake of their own freedom, so they are not terrorists. This notion should have been defined, but the western states secluded themselves from defining the notion “terrorist”, they weren't ready to define, because after that they could not point at anyone – just think about the Iberian example. So I would steer clear of using the “terrorist” as a *terminus technicus*, but you are right in any case when we are talking about the acts of the IS. They have a reference book, which was uploaded to the internet in English and in Arabic as well – now you can find it only in Arabic. It says that anyone should be hit by terror actions at random, without any logical reason, including art monuments. This can be named terrorism, even we do not have a proper definition. We can use in a loose sense, but then in respect of the whole action of the IS should we use. The other, they gained the arms from different sources, one part was heaven-sent from US and British aeroplanes, one part was donated by Western countries when they trained them and then the trained and equipped fighters of the “moderate” opposition deserted with the arms, and finally through the oil trade. Neither Saudi Arabia, nor Qatar support the IS officially, but the wealthy businessmen support the IS with money. These states do not mind their trade, if they did, they could stop it. They have the money, the possibility to trade and the borders were opened, the arm merchants knew exactly

to whom they should sell. The fact that the IS was not supported (was officially under embargo), but still they were able to take the offensive, shows that they obtain these resources without limit. They had the most modern arms, from the anti-tank rockets and trained people. And talking about where the terrorism came about – firstly there were the well trained, discharged soldiers by the US from Iraq, who lost their jobs and the only work they learned. They joined an opposition movement, which has transformed into IS. The IS coagulated from different parts, from the well trained and educated soldiers and officers of the Iraqi army to the adventurers coming from every part of the World to fight beside the local Sunni population. Traditional conflicts in this area have led to the Sunnis bombing Shiite markets and the Shiites slaughters Sunni villages. This regular fighting has spiralled out of control to the point where you cannot stop it. Why would Iraqi refugees go there? – because in the South, Iraq prospers as there is peace and well-being there. In the North, in Kurdistan Iraq prospers – but they do not go there, they simply hate each other to much, so they rather come to Europe.

What do you think, until when could they grow?

Until they let it grow. The Russians made their situations harder. Both the Iraqi and the Shiite armies have weakened, and I think the IS goes to its end. I do not know how long the agony will last, but it surly has an end. The Syrian army could have eradicated the IS a couple of times but the Europeans pumped and refilled the IS every time, both with arms and training. There was a scandal last month: Jordanian officers hid a lot of American arms for their own personal use and to sell to unknown entities. These arms were not sent to the Syrian regular army by the Americans.

Are bombing and fighting the solution? Is this effective?

No, it is not a solution. Firstly, not everyone bombs there officially. The Russians do as they have an agreement with the Syrian government, but the others have decided to bomb without any permission as if it was an uninhabited territory. No war was ever solved by bombs, so it is not a solution. The Russians coordinated the bombings with the Syrian Army; they bombed in front of the Syrian army, pushing the frontline forward. Before Fallujah was besieged, the US army was asked to coordinate their plans with the Iraqi army, but the American Airforce

replied that they had their own bomb-plans, so they were not ready to cooperate. Considering this, the Iraqi army would often turn to the Russian army for help. Before Mosul, the US Airforce finally started cooperating with the Iraqi army. Now, there is more cooperation between US and Iraqi forces, but it is still far from the cooperation that exists between the Syrian and the Russian armies.

And what should be the solution?

They should let the local forces decide. But that would not match with the American interests.

How did the neighbouring and Arab countries react?

There are two levels of the affair: there is the official policy and the popular level. The official policy takes into consideration the interests of the state. For example, during the Gulf War Egypt attacked Saddam Hussein on the US's side. The cause was that Egypt was in massive debt to the US, and the US symbolically needed Egypt. They agreed that if Egypt attacked with US, then the debt would be forgiven. The government of Egypt then sent groups of fighters, but they were ineffectual. This was mostly because it ran counter to the interests of the state to have a largescale effect. But on the streets of Cairo huge demonstrations broke out against the policy of the government. In Islam there is a priority that Muslims with Non-Muslims do not confederate against a Muslim. Then the government of Egypt violated this law of the Islam. In Saudi Arabia the population have the own relations between Sunnis. Naturally the the Sunni population of Saudi Arabia is supportive of the Sunni population of Syria against the Shiite government. However, neither country likes the fact that the US is bombing there. They want to solve this conflict on their own, with the Sunnis defeating the Shiites. Iraq supports the government of Syria, because they are Shiites as well. In Lebanon governmental position does not exist, the government exists only on paper, but Hezbollah supports the Shiites and Bashar al-Assad. Libya suffers its own difficulties, Egypt as well. Besides that, there is a disruption between the North Africans and the Arabs living in Asia. The North Africans say that they are culturally Arabs, but not in case of origin. The Asians say both. The cultural Arabic world does not encroach, as the Asians do. Egypt has their own problems, Libya as well, and in Tunisia there are the same problems – the government collapses, and in Morocco and in Algeria also. Syrians arrive from there to here as refugees.

As I have mentioned, the overpopulation afflicts the whole territory. This causes problems which could not be solved by any government. Anyone who would be elected would fail fast. And this problem is not connected with Islam.

In a recent report, the Queen of Jordan spoke about a coalition against terrorism and fear, because now there is a war against everyone. What do you think about it?

Firstly we should see that Jordan does not have any resources – no agriculture, nor industry or minerals. Jordan only has international politics. The Americans support them because of their politics, then they receive the arms etc. Jordan cannot have any Arabic characteristic position in any question; they have to follow the western politics. According to the west, Jordan is a “good guy” in the classic “good guy” and “bad guy” fight – this is a primitive worldview. Donald Trump could only say about Bashar al-Assad, that he is a Bad Guy. But this is a bit of a political oversimplification. The position of the Jordanian Queen reflects this position, besides that, she is the wife of a State President, and she has to speak from this position. However, she is not a political factor.

What is your personal opinion in regards to the recent terror acts in Europe? Were these people individual perpetrators or the soldiers of the IS? If the IS supported them, would they truly support them or just sign the action?

We should distinguish the effects and the reasons. The situation itself, that adventurer youngsters join the IS as soldiers, is a social symptom which does not have any connection to Islam. Maybe that Islam has a superiority of consciousness over the other religions. In Islam, it is a great problem that the “fighters” of the true religion are fallen behind. As they arrive to Europe they look down on Europe in every aspect – religiously, culturally, and morally (although they cannot wait to try all the immoralities) – meanwhile they are on the periphery of the society. It is very hard to understand soberly. As the 2nd and 3rd generations live in the suburbs and disdain the social stratification, dissatisfaction drives those to join IS as soldiers. Then they will have Christian slave women and they can show that they count as well. When they arrive back, they do not want to be soldiers anymore, but this emotion still drives them. If we take a look, we will see that they all lost their religion – in a secular state in Europe –, and then gained it back. The Muslim consciousness awakens and radicalises them. This goes

together with the gain and the loss of the national consciousness as well – these people are emotionally unstable and their social status is weak. *Horribile dictu*, they were criminals. I do not think that they would commit these acts by religious conviction, they just advert on this. I do not think that they were acting as the soldiers of the IS, they just pretended that. While the IS exists, there is a reference point, which they use for self-certification. It is one thing when someone commits a terror act, and another when a soldier performs. The first is a simple crime, the other is an exploit. Of course there is the possibility to send terrorists here, or who arrived to the battlefield from Europe, gave up and returned to Europe again. They would try to live a European life. But they would not be able to move away from their instable soul, but the IS is a good reference point, not religion but conviction drives them. However, I am sure that outrages occur where a lot of migrants live. To accept the migration without any border will pile up. Why should we import emotionally, socially instable people, who were not integrated at home? I do not know, I have a friend who worked as a priest, then left the church (for a young lady) and never could live normal life. They feel that they tried something and they failed. It is a great failure and break in their lives. These are the same: they left their country, tried it and failed.

Would these migrants go back to their home counties?

By all means they would go back to their countries, because many of them became the victim of the propaganda. Some Arabic friends of mine told me, that there are commercials (in a very poor country) which state: “Come to Sweden, you will get a flat and livelihood” He goes there, and does not get anything, beside that the Sun goes down very early and it is cold. Lots are misled and disappointed, they would go back – I do not know how many of them are here. Those Syrians who were educated and have a certification found jobs in Turkey. Those come to Europe, who are not educated, and the families with small children and the young men, who do not have anything to lose. If you see, the 93% of the settled migrants in Luxemburg are illiterate. How could an illiterate find a job in Germany? Meanwhile since the 80s in Europe the lower educated European people have been made redundant. Because of automation, they do not require as much of a work force as before thanks to the technological development. Besides the already stated fact that the Syrian diplomas and certificates do not cover the same knowledge which the Europeans do. This way it is far from certain that they could find a job in their profession – as an engineer or a doctor. Although there are many

Muslims who can easily integrate into the European culture, but most of them went to Christian school and/or studied in the West. This question is not about their abilities – this question is about the standard of education. Even in Germany only a few people could find a job. 1.5 million people arrived in Europe last year and 500 thousand disappeared. 100 thousand children are without any official documents. The children between the ages 15 to 18 years old are collected in Fót (Hungary) – under the rule of Islam a 16-year-old is an adult. They think of themselves as adults, but here they are treated like children.

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