

## Demographic basics shape Mideast policy

*The following is excerpted from a speech given by Prof. Bassam El Hashem on Oct. 17 to the Schiller Institute in Leesburg, Virginia.*

In order to understand what is happening in Lebanon and the whole Middle East, and the motives of American policy, whether in the Gulf crisis now, in Lebanon and Palestine, for the last four decades, there are a certain number of facts—geopolitical, demographic, etc.—that must be known first.

Early on, the Muslim world split between the Sunni (orthodox), and the Shi'a (heterodox). But through the ages, the Sunni remained nearly unified—except for the Wahhabite sects and so on—while the Shi'a were dismembered. The Sunni now represent more than 80% of the whole Islamic world.

Within the Shi'a branch, we can count the Duodecimans, who believe in the succession of 12 Imams. They believe that the last of these Imams didn't die, but disappeared, and will appear again at the end of time—a sort of messiah. The Alawites are a minority living in Syria and Turkey.

Then there are the Druses, a heretical sect, deriving from Shi'a, but no longer part of Islam. The sect was created at the beginning of the eleventh century in Egypt, which was then dominated by the Fatamids (a Shi'a sect that took control of Egypt and North Africa). The Fatamids built their own empire, which did a lot to integrate Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, and Jordan—this part of the Arab world—while the Abbasid Empire was still in existence, having Baghdad as its capital.

The Druse doctrine believes in the divinity of the Caliph under whom the sect was created; his name is al-Hakim bi-amri Allah, or al-Hakim for short. They believe that God was very often incarnated throughout history, and that the latest incarnation is al-Hakim. This has nothing to do with either Islam or with Christianity. But they still pretend to be Muslims. That is something to be understood about all the Shi'a sects: They have a principle of the *Tagiyyah*. Believers are allowed to hide their real convictions; when their security or vital interests are in danger, they are authorized to pretend to have the convictions of the one who is threatening them. So through the ages, since the end of the thirteenth

century, when the Crusaders were pushed out by the Mamluks (very tough Sunni groups coming from Asia Minor), the Druses always pretended to belong to the Sunni, just to protect themselves. This gives us a measure of the extent of the persecution that was practiced by the majority against them.

### The geopolitical map

From 1516 until 1916, during World War I, this area was part of the Ottoman Empire, which had Istanbul as its capital. That was a Sunni empire, adopting the Koran and Sunni law as the fundamental law. Under this, the heterodox were supposed to obey the majority Islamic law, while the Christians and Jews—"the People of the Book"—benefited from the so-called *Millet* regime. They were given autonomy in their personal status. "Personal status" in the Arab world refers to all the laws that concern the family, and the position of the individual in the family and in the city. They enjoyed educational autonomy, and freedom to practice their religious beliefs without persecution.

That regime was always guaranteed mainly by France and Great Britain. The Ottoman Empire was finally dismantled by these two European powers, who had been working hard at it for the last century and a half, effectively since 1797, when Napoleon launched his expedition to Egypt.

In 1916, during World War I, the French and the British concluded a secret agreement, the Sykes-Picot agreement, that once they won the war, they would divide up the region between them, into two zones of influence: a French zone, including the territory of the future Syria and Lebanon; and an English zone, including Palestine, Jordan (then called Transjordan), and Iraq—including, of course, Kuwait, which didn't exist at that time.

After the Versailles Conference in 1919, the League of Nations gave France and Britain a Mandate for this region, according to which they were in charge of helping these people, who had been dominated for so long, to take their destiny into their own hands. In 1917, a second agreement, a revision of the Sykes-Picot agreement, was concluded in San Remo, Italy. In this, they decided that these two zones would be divided into the states which you can see on the map today. That is very important, in order to understand what is happening now.

While Britain was discussing all this with France, the English king was making promises to Sherif Hussein, who was the leader of the Arabian Peninsula, and the ancestor of today's King Hussein of Jordan. The people in what is now called Saudi Arabia were loyal to him. The name Saudi Arabia comes from Ibn Saud, who was the first king of this country after the war; but in fact, the people there are loyal to Sherif Hussein and his descendants, because Sherif Hussein is a descendant of the Prophet Mohammed's family, the Qoraish tribe. The people here today consider King Hussein the legitimate successor of Sherif Hussein, rather than the

family of Ibn Saud—King Fahd and all the others.

The French created Syria and the state of Great Lebanon. During the Ottoman Empire, this whole area was an organic part of the empire, except for Mount Lebanon, which had been, since the beginning of the seventeenth century, an autonomous emirate gathering mainly the Christian Maronites, who are Catholics, and the Druses, who endured such persecution that they always pretended to belong to the Sunni Islam, not to mention other minority communities such as the Duodeciman Shi'ites. Despite all the differences that separated them from each other, these three communities participated in the same destiny, because they had to fight the same struggle for survival.

At the 1919 Conference of Versailles, the Lebanese asked France to help them recover their natural frontiers, because even though the boundaries of the emirates since the seventeenth century were a bit more than the so-called Great Lebanon that emerged after 1930, still, practically, the zone of influence of the emirs was always farther than the administrative northern boundaries. For example, under the Emir Fakhr ed-Din, the Lebanese boundaries extended to the city of Hama, in Syria. There is no secret why: This is a place where the persecuted minorities used to seek refuge. And there has always been a solidarity between them, just for their survival.

But when France gave Lebanon the right to exist, Syria always opposed it, and claimed that Lebanon had always been a part of Syria—which does not have any historical basis whatsoever. Before 1920, Syria had never existed as a country. Syria itself was divided into a certain number of *vilayet* during the Ottoman Empire, and had never constituted a political unity.

While France was doing this, the British were first of all promising Sherif Hussein to help him create a state of Arab unity, but behind the scenes they were negotiating with the French dividing up the area, and at the same time, in 1917, they gave their famous Balfour promise to the Zionist movement, that they would help the Jews to create a homeland in Palestine.

The British, when they divided this area, decided to create Jordan, Palestine—with two opposite promises. For Iraq, they separated all the seacoast area and created an independent emirate, just to block Iraq from the sea. This has never been accepted by the Iraqis.

Never did the Arabs agree with this partition plan when they discovered that it existed. They always rejected it, and vowed to struggle for the reunification of the Arab world.

Now, we know where the basic geopolitical map of the Middle East comes from.

## Demographic complexity

What are the demographic facts of the Middle East?

I will start with Lebanon, using figures from 1975. I cannot give you data about the present, because, with all the hostilities, the transfer of population because of massacres,

and so on, there is a new distribution, and most of the Christians have fled, resulting in a demographic imbalance in the country. But we cannot consider this as a structural fact; if anything changed, most of the Lebanese who left the country since 1975 would go back, and I am one of those. But in 1975, Lebanon was approximately composed of 50% Christians and 50% Muslims, with the Druses considered part of the Muslim group, because that is how they classify themselves. Of the Muslims, 42% are Sunni, 46% are Shi'ite, and the Druses are 12%—most of the Druses have moved to Syria since the eighteenth century.

There are 11 Christian communities, representing all the Eastern churches—except for the Coptic, which is the Egyptian church. The principal community on the Christian side are the Maronites, the oldest Christian community in Lebanon, because that is where the Maronite church was founded in the north of Lebanon at the end of the seventh century. The Maronites are 60% of the Christian half of Lebanon.

Then there are the Melkites. They used to be the Orthodox church, but at the end of the seventeenth century, this church split; part remained Orthodox and part became Catholic, re-joining Rome.

The fourth community is the Armenian, because, after the Armenian genocide was committed by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk during World War I, most of the survivors came to Lebanon, where they found refuge. Others went to the United States and France.

Israel, as you know, is a monoreligious, monoracial state, and the ideology of the state is to refuse any mixture; they don't want any multiconfessional structure.

As for Syria, 72% of Syria was Sunni, as of 1979. The Alawites (the confession of President Hafez al-Assad) are 12.5%; Christians were 11%; Druses about 2.5%, etc.

Jordan is 96% Sunni, and 4% Christian.

Iraq is a country which has two characteristics on this level: an ethnic duality between Kurds and Arabs, and a religious multiconfessionalism. On the confessional level, 52% of the population of Iraq in 1979 was Shi'ite—that is very important. All of these—the Shi'ites of Lebanon, of Iraq, and of Iran—are Duodeciman. The rest, 48%, included 3.5% Christians and 45% Sunni. But the Kurds are Sunni. We find that most of the 45% of the population who are Sunni are Kurds, and not Arabs. Saddam Hussein is an Arab Sunni.

There is often confusion concerning Iran; I hear, "The Arabs are fighting among themselves." But in fact, the Iranians are not Arabs at all, from an ethnic point of view. The Iranians are Persians, and the Arabs are Arabs. Their only common denominator is that they both are Muslims—but within the Arab world there are also Christians. I am a Christian, and I am an Arab. But the Arab world is Muslim, and Iran is Muslim too—though even here, one has to distinguish Iran as being a Shi'ite Muslim country, by 88% of its population, while the Arab world is mostly Sunni.