

Middle East Dialogue 2015...Glorious Past, Uncertain Future

THE ONYMIC WAR IN SYRIA: WHAT NAMES FOR THE NEW LANDSCAPE?

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According to Maoz Azaryahu, place names “provide for the intersection of hegemonic ideological structures with the spatial practices of everyday life”. In commemorative names the national myth/legend is narrated but the narrative is not complete: the villains of the story are not worthy to be commemorated, thus we do not find street names commemorating those who are considered to be “enemies” or “villains” of the national construction¹. In this paper we will assess the Baathist era of Syria (1963-2011) by a reading of place name changings and Baath-inspired modifications to Syria-as-text. Then we will explore future possibilities of new namescape with the emergence of new landscapes in Syria after an eventual end of the civil war which has been devastating the country since March 2011. In other terms we will explore heroes and villains in an eventual post-war Syria.

Syria's onymic landscape 1963-2011

Syria has undergone baathization of its text and re-writing of its map since 1963. At the geographic scale of the country some interesting naming was made to “write” the Baathist ideology on the maps and on the national space: Assad Lake, Euphrates Project and Al-Thawra town are the best examples.

At the scale of the cities and towns of Syria more changes are introduced: every city or town has streets commemorating the Baath party and its symbols and national narrative. From 1994 and on many main fares commemorate Bassel Assad, the eldest son of President Assad killed in a car accident in January 1994. After 2000 Hafez Assad is commemorated in many aspects, and certainly in commemorative place names. The great ideological notions of Baath are all commemorated in every Syrian city and Town: (Arab) Unity, Socialism, Nationalism, and Revolution, amongst others.

An ongoing onymic war

This geographical reality is defied and challenged since the beginning of the events in 2011. The civil war is manifested by an armed violent conflict, by also by a semiotic war. Yassin Al-Haj Sameh, a Syrian writer, classifies four Syrias at the semiotic level: a Syria who takes Assad's photo as her symbol (Souriyya al-Assad), a loyalist Syria (without

¹ For example in the *Interbellum* France Maréchal Pétain was considered to be a hero of WWI and streets commemorated his name. After the liberation of 1944 Maréchal Pétain became the villain who collaborated with the Nazis and his names were deleted from the French towns/maps.

being Assadist) with the national flag, an opponent Syria with the opposition flag, and an Islamist extremist one with the Islamic Conquest banner.

Changes by the Opposition

The opponents want to “correct” this geography: first in the education syllabi, the suggestions are to change all names related to the Baath-Assad era in the syllabi and all notions related to Baath ideology.

Then changes in place names: new names were suggested and which commemorate the martyrs of the “Revolution”.

Even via MapMaker some activists changed Syrian place names in Google Maps, and this change was opposed vehemently by Mr. Jaafari, the Syrian ambassador to the UN who condemned it openly and who considered it as a “part of the universal conspiracy against Syria”.

Changes by IS

The changes are way more radical, at first IS changes every name which can denote the rich Christian history in its controlled territory: Deir Hafer to Dar al Fath, Deir al Zor to Wilayat al Fath and all the commemorative names in Raqqa to more Islamic names. The local people continue to use old vernacular and commemorative names but in every administrative procedure people have to use the new ones imposed by IS.

Changes by the Government

The Government has introduced some changes in cities and towns still under its control. For example the Qatar Street in Latakia was changed to Fida Ahmad Street, after the military security chief killed in Jisr al Shugur in 2011. The King Abdul Aziz Street of Damascus is changed to Hugo Chavez! The Government intends to commemorate “the martyrs of the nation” in re-writing some other place and street names.

What names for the new landscape(s)?

There will be an eventual end to the Syrian war. The scenarii are quite different: the “best” is a general national reconciliation and reconstruction, and the “worst” is the country to cease to exist. In all these scenarii there will be a new physical landscape in the country, and a new namescape (as being a very essential part of landscape). The question: what new names to choose for the new landscapes in Syria (or Syrias)? In other words: who will be the new villains and the new heroes of national narrative(s) and will it be possible to reconstruct a “reconciliatory” national narrative?

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