

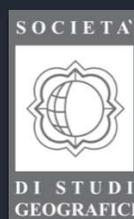
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ALESSANDRO RICCI

CHALLENGES AND REVENGE OF BORDERS. THE ISLAMIC STATE AND COVID-19 AS OPPOSITE POLES OF THE SAME PENDULUM

1. INTRODUZIONE. – What is happening to borders in recent years? What is their destiny as elements of a world based on the end of the Cold War, taking into account the theories about their “decadence” proposed by many authors during the 90’s?

The aim of this contribution is the attempt to put in evidence the role of borders in a period of globalization, such as the one we have lived in the last 30 years, considering the main challenges for the international order in the last years represented by the Islamic State and the other geopolitical critical scenarios, and the revenge of borders in the Covid-19 crisis which shocked the world economically, politically and geopolitically. The political and religious formula known as the Caliphate tried to put in crisis the international system by proposing a State model completely different from the Westphalian one, based on concepts and “imperial” formulas which attempted to overpass the global order¹. This coincided with a moment of international crisis based on the clash between the two main State models: the “Western” or Westphalian one and the Islamic one, interpreted by the IS.

Since the Covid-19 started to spread, the world lived (and is living) an international crisis – not only medical but also political, economic, social and geopolitical – in which there is a sort of “revenge of borders”, bolding them also where they were inexistent before, as it happened among the Italian regions. The main frame in which the borders are considered in both these two scenarios is the globalized world, in the geopolitical and global system that seems to be associated to the Geography of Uncertainty (Ricci, 2015b; 2017). At the same time, that clash between two models contributed to create global uncertainty, chaos and disorder.

2. GLOBALIZATION AND UNCERTAINTY. – Putting together the idea of uncertainty and geography may seem an inextricable paradox. Geography is usually intended as the discipline useful to put order in the elements which compose the world reality and its image. This is the first attribute given to geography starting from the school. Emanuela Casti gave a complete and effective definition of geography as the ordered representation of the World (Casti, 1998). Furthermore, according to Franco Farinelli, geography is a hierarchy, a whole of relations of power and authority (Farinelli, 2003, p. 6). Giuseppe Dematteis, from his part, puts in evidence how much this discipline can give security to human beings (Dematteis, 1985, p. 16).

These definitions sum up very well the deep significance of the geographical discipline: a knowledge necessary to give a detailed and certain description of the world reality and able to establish a hierarchy of the elements to be represented on the maps. This is precisely the reason why the role that geography assumed in history has usually been related to politics (Pelletier 2001; Raffestin 1983; 2012; Boria 2007; Minca e Bialasiewicz 2004) and to the management of the territorial dimensions. That is why we normally intend geography as correspondent to the idea of an «order».

¹ Cfr. other works on this topic (Ricci, 2018).



Many other and very influent scholars faced the topic of the *uncertainty* intrinsic to the globalization processes, focusing their attention on the human relations and the fluidity of the economic and financial dynamics (Clark, 2005). Thrift (2005), as a geographer, connected history and geography pointing out the growing uncertainty inside the capitalism dynamics of the modern world. In the sociological and anthropological fields, many studies have highlighted the condition of men in globalization. The key figures in these studies have been Ulrich Beck and Zygmunt Bauman. The first one focused his attention on the risks deriving from the massive system of production (1992). The second one argued that we are living in a «liquid modernity» and in an uncertain society (1999; 2012) because of the destructive power of the world economy on the disappearing human identity within the global context. Miguel Benasayag and Gérard Schmit (2019) gave a definition of the modern times as characterized by the «sad passions», mostly referring to the 20th Century, when after the positivist epoch the progress of the sciences threw men into uncertainty instead of ensuring them more certainty (p. 21).

According to the Italian dictionary Treccani, *uncertainty* is intended as a critical moment in which is crucial taking decisions despite the impossibility to foresee the future events. It is therefore clear that the *time* dimension should be considered rather than the *spatial* one. Nevertheless, starting from this basic definition, focused on the events occurring during time, it should be translated in the geographical dimension.

Among other considerations, we can firstly say that the Geography of uncertainty corresponds to three main factors from which it is generated and that characterized the international system during the last years: 1) the *general crisis* of an international system (Cfr. Colombo, 2014); 2) the *chaos*, the disorder of the global political scenario; 3) a *revolution* in the way of thinking or in the world spatial order, due to the clash between two main system, in the passage between the one and the other one, as it happened between the middle age and the modern age, or at the end of the Cold War.

A system gets into *crisis* when its pillars show fractures. The international political system, the so-called Westphalian order and the actual globalization process, have based their contemporary existence on two main pillars: on one hand, the attempt to overcome the Nation States, as the only political entity able to represent and sum-up in itself a territory, as it emerged and was affirmed during the Modern Age (Elden, 2012; Kissinger, 2015; Terni, 2014). On the other hand, the affirmation of the liberal capitalistic economy (Fukuyama, 1992) on which globalization developed through global lines. These two bases of globalization have prospered since the fall of the Berlin Wall until it was put in crisis with moments that emerged as the “interruptions” of this process.

After the affirmation of the global model occurred during the 90’s, when scholars and politicians tried to overlap the old order based on the confrontation between two models as during the Cold War, a «New world order» emerged, in which borders should be overpassed by the global economies, as stated by Kenichi Ohmae: «with the ending of the Cold War, the long-familiar pattern of alliances and oppositions (...) fractured (...). Less visibly, but arguably far more important, the modern nation state itself – that artifact of 18th and 19th centuries – ha begun to crumble» (1995, p. 7). In that world a new language was born: the one «of an increasingly borderless economy, a true global marketplace» (Ibidem, p. 8). Ten years later he repeated the same concepts, affirming that «we now can largely speak of a world without borders and barriers» (Ohmae, 2005, p. 30).

That was, in another sense, the same model proposed as the winning one, as the only possible and thinkable by scholars as Francis Fukuyama in his main book on the *End of History and the Last Man* (1992). The opposite way of thinking was argued by Samuel Paul Huntington (1993), based on the idea that the world would have lived a clash among different civilizations, targeting nine main different cultures, which corresponded to nine different

areas of the world. After the 90's, during which the world seemed to agree to the Fukuyama theses, a crucial moment in contemporary times happened: the 9/11 and the attack to the Twin Towers and the Pentagon.

3. MOMENTS OF INTERRUPTIONS OF GLOBALIZATION. – Starting from that moment, the supposed image of a world pacified by the liberal democratic model fell. Geographically, the borders started to re-emerge in all their virulence, as well explained by many authors (among them, see Kaplan, 2012). The models of a «borderless world», in which the countries would have abandoned their reciprocal limits and frontiers because of the primacy of the financial movements and markets, started to lose their original power. Since 9/11 a series of other events represented the “moments of interruption” of the supposed global world and the three terms useful to define the geography of uncertainty – crisis, chaos and revolution – rose, because of the inability of the United States to represent the centre of the world order and to ensure the global stability. In a symbolic way, the centre *missed* its centrality.

Since that critical and revolutionary moment, other factors have put in crisis, both economically and politically, the New World Order. Firstly, from the economic and financial points of view, the globalization stability was affected in its capitalistic pillar during the financial crisis of 2007/2008.

Then, we lived and we are now living other threats to the Westphalian order and to the globalization process: *i)* the rise of the Islamic State as the main challenge to the Westphalian order and to the stability of the borders established in centuries *ii)* and the Covid-19 pandemic, which paradoxically contributed to “regenerate” the national borders and that will represent an exceptional moment of crisis of globalization in its whole.

The major threat to the Westphalian order during recent years has been represented by the affirmation, rise and terroristic activities of the Islamic State. It has been proclaimed officially in July 2014 by the self-declared Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, representing a deeply different conception in the exercise of power within a territory. The IS has represented, indeed, a particular form of State, based on religious and political concepts which tended to overpass the national borders as they have been lived for decades.

It has been the axial point of an enormous “Arch of Crisis” (Brzezinski, 2004) that has to be highlighted to better understand the entity of the current geopolitical scenario that is putting in crisis the stability of the world order of globalization as we know it.

The other geopolitical critical scenarios that compose a sort of “Arch of crisis” of globalization and world stability, occurred during the last 20 years, are: 1) The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. They contributed to change the way the United States would intervene in the global scenario. Starting from that moment, in an attempt to widen their areas of influence, they could not act as a real global power in further scenario, contributing to the Post-American Middle East (Foreign Affairs, 2015) and to the End of the Pax American (Simon e Stevenson, 2015); 2) the so-called Arab Spring and the consequent enormous migration flows in the Mediterranean Sea and in the Eastern route. It rose after the clash of the revolutionary movements in 2011 with the destabilization of Libya. This critical scenario has put in crisis the European Union in its internal political composition and fragile cohesion, demonstrating its incapacity to manage the situation; 3) the same arch *of crisis* touched the Arabic peninsula, especially in the internal tensions in Yemen which is another disastrous consequence of the Arab spring; 4) the emergence of “sovereignist” and Eurosceptic parties which represent another threat to the supranational governance as a base of the globalization; 5) Finally, it is impossible to forget a part of this arch that arrives to involve the Eastern part of Europe, Russia and Asia, regarding the conflict between Ukraine and Russia.

What is the main common characteristic among all these crises? There is one, among the others, that clearly appears: all these scenarios have had *global* effects. They are not only

regional, limited conflicts and crises, but they regard other international actors, as the United States, China, Europe in its whole. That is the case of the conflict in East Ukraine and Crimea, the crisis in the Mediterranean basin, the regional conflict in the Middle East and Libya, with the multilateral intervention decided by France with the support of Great Britain and United States. That is the reason why they represented moments of a *systemic crisis* of the international established order, of the geographical and geopolitical certainties, contributing to the definition of geographical uncertainty.

In this path, the Islamic State and its attempts to establish a renewed Caliphate, represented the most relevant challenge to the Westphalian order during the last years. It put in crisis not only the stability of a single region but, more in general, the entire international system by proposing a different order, going over the inter-national borders. These are the reasons why it has been even in a limited territorial dimension, the main threat to the political order based on the Nation-States, both symbolically and concretely.

4. THE ISLAMIC STATE. – Since its official foundation during the summer of 2014, with the video message made by the self-named Caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the Islamic State has been the most shocking presence not only in the Middle East and notably in Syria, Iraq and Libya, but also in the entire world. It is very interesting to notice why it has been a real challenge to the international order, although with a spatial limited presence, by asking two main questions: 1) which are the political bases of the Islamic State? And 2) which political effects did it determine in the world reality? In other words: why did it represent the most powerful challenge to the Westphalian order?

It is possible to find the answers to these questions in the political theology the Islamic refers to. More precisely, this field considers both the political and the religious aspects related to actions. In doing so, it is important not to consider primarily the secularized and Western points of view, which do not entirely take into account the religious aspects of the political action: in the case of IS, religious way of thinking and interpreting is strictly interconnected with politics (Lewis, 2005). The Islamic State is a sort of revolutionary State, standing on the M. Walt's opinion: from a political point of view, it puts together the extremist movement, violent tendencies, great ambitions and territorial control (Walt, 2015, p. 42).

This is the reason why the media system, as well as most of the western analysts, fail in talking of “lone wolves”, “crazy people”, “mad men” referring to the terrorist attackers. They indeed respond to a specific political and religious point of view, an organized media and social system, a global perspective interpreted by the Islamic State as a war against the infidels and the West more in general, taking in consideration a proper global scale of action (Byman, 2016; Roy, 2004).

The evolution in the name of the Caliphate states it: the first name was ISI (Islamic State of Iraq), then it became ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and Levant), then ISIS, with a territorial definition in Iraq and Syria, and after the pledges from different parts of the world, simply IS, Islamic State, the new edition of the Caliphate. Another mistake of the western media system is to refuse to consider them as a State (that is why there is an impressive use of adjectives such as “self-named”, “so called”, “self-proclaimed” Islamic State, forgetting that they *are* an “Islamic State”). They represented a specific form of State, not from the Western and secularized points of view but more properly from the Islamic (perhaps Islamist) one. The result is evident: a global strategy with *global* attacks, because of a *global* point of view, able to act everywhere.

This is the central point: they created geographical uncertainty because they proposed a different political model, with a global perspective. In the Islamic State, *territory* only defines the day-by-day action. As stated by Bianca Maria Scarcia Amoretti, borders in the Islamic

perception are convention and not barrier, lines of demarcation of differences but not obstacles to the free circulation of human beings (1998, p. 40). In the IS' political perspective, borders are considered as mobile frontiers, because of the expanding way of thinking based on some religious concepts.

This coincided also with a global response from the geopolitical actors in the world. The creation of a Global Coalition to fight against the Islamic State, the war operations made by the Russian Federation contributed to the "Third World War fought piecemeal", as stated by Pope Francis. Another aspect to be considered about the global action of IS concerns its global propaganda, based on the use of social media and a very effective use of Media Centers which produced video and media contents able to be spread all over the world (Cfr. Winter, 2015; Zavettieri, 2018; Morazzoni, Zavettieri, 2019; Ricci, 2019a).

Which are the main political concepts the Islamic State refer to and that contribute to give a global perspective? *Jihad* is the "struggle" to be fought internally, against any personal weakness and externally, with the tongue, the sword and every available tool (Kissinger, 2015). *Jihad* is based on the universality of the God's message: words and messages of God have to be spread by the ones who accepted them. This is a timeless and limitless obligation for muslims (Lewis, 1996, p. 85). In the political and religious perspective adopted by the Islamic State, the world is substantially divided in two main parts: the House of Islam, corresponding to the *Dār al-Islām*, where the Islamic laws prevail, and the House of War (*Dār al-Harb*), which includes the other parts of the world. Between these two parts there is a state of war, from a legal and a religious points of view, until the final winning of Islam (Lewis, 2005, p. 85).

Dar Al Islam is the "house of the Islam", the portions of the world in which an Islamic government is in charge. *Dār al-Harb* is what is out of the *Dār al-Islām*, and it represents the *house of the war*, where a war can be fought (Kissinger, 2015, p. 102). *Umma* is the Islamic community all over the world, which doesn't consider any territory for that belonging. This is why IS refuse the national belongings and does not recognize the international community. In some propagandistic videos produced by the Islamic State media centers, the symbolic gesture of burning the original passports of the new affiliates, made during their oath to the Caliphate, is reproduced. The presence of militias composed by people from those countries and from other countries, as also declared and shown in many of their propaganda videos (see, for example, the video entitled "No Respite"), is a confirmation of their global political perspective (Ricci, 2015a; Bahney e Johnston, 2017).

In the last statement of al-Baghdadi, left by a video message produced by *Al Furqan media center* in April 29th 2019, the global perspective emerged very clearly: 92 war operations in 8 different theaters are mentioned. At the same time, he spoke also of Syria, Iraq, Arabic Peninsula named as the "Mohammed Peninsula", Libya, Burkina Faso, Mali, France, the region of Khorasan in Central Asia, Israel, Algeria, Sudan, Sri Lanka and Yemen (Cfr. Ricci, 2019b).

5. THE CLASH BETWEEN TWO VISIONS. – The actual geographical and mainly geopolitical global uncertainty seems to be provoked by the clash between the two models of reference. On one hand, the IS's perspective, similar to an imperial outlook which does not consider the national borders. On the other hand, the Westphalian one, which is based on the consideration of territory as an element of certainty.

In the Westphalian perspective, standing on the initiators of the modern political thought, the international system is indeed based on the existence of different States, which always refer to a specific territory. The State is a defined composition: from a geographical perspective, it has a certain territory, in which a certain community lives, with a specific language, religion and, more in general, a unique culture. State properly refers to the Latin

word *Status*, that means something static, stable, certain (Schmitt, 2009). And the static adjective derives first of all from the territorial definition (Elden, 2012).

The borders in the Nation-States are the elements of certainty, that overpass the political and religious logic of empire, for which the space coincides with the whole world, whose boundaries are the limits of the world (Schiavone, 2008, p. 29) and which does not consider spatial and temporal limitations, because it is potentially limitless and eternal. State and its territorial sovereignty were the indisputable reality of the early modern age (Terni, 2014, p. 73). That is why the signs that correspond to borders (stones, limits, etc.) were usually durable: they had to resist long time and they express continuity, the sense of community, identity and the links among past, present and future (Zanini, 2000, p. 41).

Political geography originated in that political and continental context of Modern Age, because at that time the concept of borders began to be fully associated to States: a dense network of diplomatic relations among States settled, showing the need for a profound afterthought of the European internal political logics and consequently of its internal borders (Aubert, 2008).

The European 16th century led to the conflict that marked all that historical period, first of all religiously and then even politically, culturally, scientifically and so on, as reported by Kamen (1982). The same conflict which involved every level of human action and knowledge did not remain enclosed within the borders of Europe but moved elsewhere, overseas, where Europe extended its political projects beyond the Pillars of Hercules, exactly following the colonial and power flows, in the broadest sense, of the European states toward the Americas. The extension of the European spaces was, during the 16th century, almost definitive and changed the understanding of the Old Continent and its conceptual definition of thought and identity, in such a way that modern Europe will find a space to vent also in the New World: «the theatre of conflict between its various states was extended to include lands and seas placed far beyond the traditional limits of Europe, the Pillars of Hercules» (Elliott, 1985, p. 93).

Nowadays, the globalization process tried to put in crisis the concept of borders, and the Islamic State represented the attempt to overpass the Westphalian order by proposing a religious and political model similar to a conception of empire.

The post-Cold War system was defined by an «economical map [that] runs over borders, states and limits», and «therefore does not define a political space», but it is impossible to overpass so easily the border definitions, as well stated by Raffestin (2005). Elena dell’Agnese and Enrico Squarcina well responded to the theses of those who, as Ohmae, affirm the importance of borders in the globalization era: as a limit of the sovereignty of State, they never cease to exist. On the contrary, the emergence of ethnical conflicts and separatist tension seems to witness, that the Nation-State is still alive as a central category in the organization of political space. The globalization itself is a product of the action of States (dell’Agnese, Squarcina, 2005, p. XIII).

The same concept has been expressed by Desmond King and Robert C. Lieberman, who state that: «contrary to the brave new world many expected in the wake of globalization and global economic integration — a world in which the ability of states to exercise control over the territories, populations, and economies contained within national boundaries would atrophy in the face of economic interdependence — the state has remained doggedly present» (2009, p. 550).

According to Sabino Cassese, in the struggle against global terrorism or other global threats, globalization cannot give effective answers, because the global scenario is set out by single States, which are defined by specific territories and borders. These boundary elements represent an obstacle to the fight against these global threats, because every State has a specific role into its territorial limits (2016, p. 44).

6. CONCLUSIONS. – We thought the Islamic State was defeated with the last battle of Baghouz, in Syria, in the final moments of its *territorial* presence. The facts demonstrate that the Islamic State has been defeated only in its effective territorial presence.

Since that moment in March 2019, IS started a new phase – a “post-territorial” phase – of its existence, that was opened with the second video-message of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi of the end of April. In that occasion the Caliph wanted to demonstrate that the Islamic State was still alive. The messages in that case were very clear: 1) to fight a war with all the tools, with no borders, the *jihad*. The geographical references were evident: he spoke of 8 geographical specific contexts; 2) to fight against the Christians, defined as *crusaders*. This appeared clear with the terroristic attacks in Sri Lanka, Burkina Faso and Egypt, where Christians were targeted properly because they were Christians. 3) the Islamic State still maintain the leadership of the global *jihad*. This seems to be the underlying message of the whole video, in order to recruit new forces into the jihadist movements.

The challenge represented by the Islamic State to the Westphalian order is still strong and not finished because of the conclusion of their territorial experience. It has assumed a different clothing, based not anymore on the territorial effectiveness but on terroristic attacks and on the media presence. Most of all, it is not the only scenario that have put in crisis the Westphalian order. It is just one of the different challenges of the actual globalization, as mentioned above.

In this global scenario, borders were strongly overpassed by the Islamic State in its political assumptions, representing a specific threat to the global order. At this purpose, the present global theatre is characterized by a sort of revenge of borders not only because of the other critical events and chaotic geopolitical scenarios, but also because of the Coronavirus pandemic.

The crisis derived from the “global virus” gave renewed relevance to borders. For the Italian case, for example, they were added even where they were only administrative boundaries: in the first steps of the national crisis, between the end of February and the early March, Lombardia was considered as a “red zone”.

This political act demonstrated how much borders became important after “mistreating” them along the globalization. At the same time, this represents a sort of paradoxical process: the pandemic was certainly favored by the openness of the world and by the substantial absence of borders and, because of that openness, Nation States had to close the in a coercive and never experienced way.

Globalization seems to be facing threats as the one represented by the Islamic State and new considerations of borders, as given by the Covid-19 crisis. But, as stated by other authors, seems to be impossible, at the moment, to overpass the Nation-States and their borders, as established since about four centuries. That model – the Westphalian one – represents the elements of “certainty” in a chaotic world as the one we are living in, in which threats and new considerations of borders are arising. Both these represent the opposite poles of the same global pendulum.

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RIASSUNTO: *Sfide e vendetta dei confini. Lo Stato Islamico e il Covid-19 come poli opposti di uno stesso pendolo* – Se con la fine della Guerra fredda si era ritenuto di poter surclassare i confini nazionali, gli accadimenti geopolitici degli ultimi anni hanno portato a riconsiderare tali teorie: da una parte lo Stato Islamico ha rappresentato una sfida all'ordine mondiale inteso come insieme di Stati nazionali suddivisi da confini; dall'altra, la crisi derivante dalla pandemia di Coronavirus ha fatto riemergere, in una sorta di vendetta, gli stessi confini. Dimostrando, nell'uno e nell'altro caso, che rappresentano i poli contrapposti di uno stesso pendolo, quando siano ancora elemento dirimente ed essenziale della politica internazionale.

SUMMARY: After the Cold War theories about the overpassing of national borders emerged as preminent. The events occurred during the last 20 years put in crisis those theories: on one hand, the Islamic State represented the major challenge to the World order based on Nation-States; on the other, the Covid-19 crisis seems to favour a revenge of borders. These are the two opposite poles of a same pendulum, in which the national borders still remain the crucial elements of international relations.

Parole chiave: Stato Islamico, Confini, Globalizzazione
 Keywords: Islamic State, Borders, Globalization