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ORIGINAL VERSION:

Dialogues with Georges Corm



Interview by Lorenzo Carrieri (Beirut, April 2014)

--A while ago we witnessed the outbreak of the Arab Uprising: of that experience what survives today? After military coup in Egypt (and Sisi victory at the poll), Islamic seizure of power of Tunisia, the power of Islamic militias in Lybia DOES IS STILL MAKE SENSO TO TALK ABOUT UPRISING?--

One, in the short term, is tempted to be pessimistic, looking at what happened. But 2011 Uprising are historical event that can still produce a lot of new waves, a lot of attempts by arab social classes: it's a revolutionary footprint inside the Arab world. If you take every revolutions, the Russian one, the French one, the Chinese one, each of these has had his stage, the same in the Arab world: revolution can't happen in 3 days, it's a longstanding process.

I believe events of 2011 were great: they have helped to reconstitute what I call "arab collective consciousness", that is something totally wrong with the way the arab countries have been managed. I also believe these events will remain in the minds of the people, as much as we have seen Gamal Abdel Nasser came back to the forefront. Finally we can't have a judgment of what is going to happen in the future, so far what we can see is what has derailed. The outcomes of these popular revolt has been seriously affected by something you can't clearly identify, and that are not new in the Arab history: that is foreign interference, which has been extremely intense and deep if you look at the Libyan and the Syrian situation. This is almost unbelievable.

Personally I was not astonished at all that the same coalition of anti-change forces in the Arab world and in the West got together in order to abort these mass movements, going from Oman to Mauritania: here again we got the alliance of muslim conservative forces, whose big sponsors are Qatar and Saudi Arabia, and western countries. We have witnessed this coalition on the job with the military intervention in the case of Syria: not directly by western armies but thanks to the use of proxies and foreign invaders/fighters, coming in the name of Islam. So personally I am not surprised that is the same coalition that as formed against Nasser and against Muhammad Ali in Egypt. This is a very strategic region, it contains huge energy reserves: it is extremely difficult, in absence of a powerful arab state, to prevent all these interventions.

--Why The ISLAMIC FORCES HAVE BEEN ABLE TO TAKE OVER THE UPRISING INSTEAD OF LEFTIST ONES?--

I wouldn't talk about leftist forces, it is negatively connoted: I would rather talk about forces of change. Islamists in the squares were a minority, and sometime they didn't share the revolutionary view of the most of the people, they stood aside: but when elections has been held, they were the biggest force on the ground, they had well-ground organizations and widespread networks of charitable NGOs in rural and poor areas of the largest arab towns. They've been established there since 40-50 years, and they handled petro-dollars: Islamist forces were very well ingrained and I immediately saw they were going to win the elections. They were also able to exercise a kind of hegemony in the media mainstream, both Gulf and Western ones: Islamists showed off themselves as a victim of bloody longstanding dictatorships, of stupid arab nationalism. There's a kind of story-telling about this, on the contrary no one talks about secular and leftist activists have been imprisoned and tortured, no one talks about what happened in the Gulf countries where there are political-religious dictatorships under the form of monarchies far more bloody than others: this view has helped them a lot.

In Egypt the forces of change presented a candidate, mr. Sabahi Hamdine, but as the followers of the Moubarak fallen regime were allowed to present a candidate, Ahmed Chafic, the former prime minister under Moubarac, this has facilitated the election of Mohammed Morsi the Muslim Brotherhood candidate who was elected with a few votes above those obtained by Mr. Sabahi. In Tunisia we witnessed the return of Ennhada, and also we have the Unions, that are very might and powerful. But it's totally different when you have general elections, the help of foreign money and the balance-of-power on you: the Muslim Brotherhood was able to set up a good image, even in spite of what happened in Algeria in the 90's. People still tend to believe they were victims, that was awful to put them in jail. This views has been spread by the story-telling: the Islamists were martyred people, as they deserved to be elected and rule the country, because all the secular elements have failed. But this story-telling didn't stand when put to the test: we have seen the popular reaction in Egypt, when millions of people gathered in the squares asking Morsi to step down. In Tunisia the situation seems to be better: it's smaller than Egypt, trade unions are powerful, there are feminist movements opposing Ennhada, and when Islamist violence erupted, with the assassination of liberal personalities, Tunisians have been able to redress the situation and to get positive development, like the new constitution.

Coming back to Egypt, I don't know if the outlaw of Brotherhood will stablyze the situation, I hope so. It's a complex and paradoxical situation, because military rule that toppled down Morsi is backed by the largest Islamist power in the region, Saudi Arabia. In my view Saudis have always been the most powerful sponsors of every muslim Brotherhood branch in Arab and Moslem countries, to secure its influence and maintained tensions inside its Arab neighbors: But in the case of Egytp something else is to have a Muslim Brotherhood regime in the greatest arab country which would be in competition with Saudi Arabia leadership. And this happens not only in the Arab world but in the whole muslim world: it's interesting to see what is gonna happen, even in the light of the paradoxical behaviour of the Gulf countries towards the various Brotherhoods.

--What about the "islamization" of the societies you talked in your works?--

I wrote a lot on the instrumentalization of Judaism, Islam and Christianity during the last period of the Cold War. It was clearly a policy backed by the United States in order to balance communist forces in the Arab World. We don't have to forget that communists were very powerful in the muslim countries: in Iran with Tudeh, in Iraq, also in Egypt and in Indonesia and Sudan.

Story-telling doesn't say this, because, for the majority of people, the communism will not match with Islam, but this is an orientalist point of view. The US started to panic looking at the spreading of the socialist idea all over the arab world during the sixteens and seventies of last centuries, so they began a

particular policy, under the inspiration of security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski: to arise the religious sentiment in order to counterweight the extension of various forms of communist ideologies. This was the same Pope John Paul II did in Poland. It is not a new fact the use of the religious factors to contrast the secular ideas: even in Judaism we have witnessed the same, with a lot of well-meaning intellectuals and liberals turned into a neo-conservative point of view.

Anyway, about Islamization of societies and the repression of communist movements, we have to look of what happened in Sudan: here we had the most influential communist party in the Muslim world, and the Islamist forces of Nimeiry, ally of the US, cracked down on communists. The same happened in Indonesia, with the crack down of Suharto regime, that killed more than 500'000 people. In Iran happened what I called geopolitical misunderstanding: Khomeini has been brought there to prevent the takeover by the Tudeh Iranian communist party allied to the islamo-marxists Mujahidin Khalq and the liberals under Mehdi Bazargan. But for the West Khomeini should've been another Muslim Brotherhood, indeed the US wouldn't have thought he could turn into an anti-imperialist and anti-US head of state: they put Khomeini in Paris at the time the Shah was still in office in Iran in order to use him definitely against the secular political and nationalist forces. We can say there is a kind of "market" of religions as US sociology describes it, it's a big business, even here in Lebanon.

But what I want to stress is that "use of religion" doesn't mean a decline of secular ideas, like panarabism: for instance, if we look at what happened in the Arab Uprising, we see the outbreak of a new wave of "arab collective consciousness". And even in this case the political regimes preferred to counterweight this "arab consciousness" with the use of political Islam, because is easier to deal with pan-Islamism, that doesn't call into question anything of the power structures, rather than with panarabist/change forces.

--HOW COME THE MONARCHIES DIDN'T EXPERIENCE THE UPRISING?--

First of all they experienced the Uprising: definitely they experienced! Except probably for Kuwait and United Arab Emirates, we have Oman, Bahrein and Saudi Arabia revolts that broke out in 2011: the problem has been that there was not media coverage of these events, it was not interest to spread the image of these revolts. We don't have to forget that Bahrein has been invaded by Saudi Army, who helped the ruling family of Al-Khalifa to crack down on the Uprising: but, despite the repression, the demonstrations goes on, daily. Even in Saudi Arabia we had revolts, above all in the eastern areas of the Kingdom, mostly inhabited by Shia populations: here the monarchy, to keep under control the situation, on one hand increased the pay, gave economic incentives and made some superficial concessions on personal freedoms; on the other hand they still carry on the repression. Nevertheless we have to consider that these revolts, Bahrein and Saudi, are not related to the fact the rioters are mostly Shia, though they are deprived and excluded from social and political life, but are supported by numerous liberals Sunni which wants to change the situation. The weird thing is that US has not have a foreign policy on what happened in the Arab world during 2011 spring: each day there was a declaration of some american official that contradicted the one of the day before. Anyway the US are pragmatic towards the Arab Uprisings: they officialy backed revolts and requested democratization, but, off-the-record, in some case they stood with the status quo, like in Bahrein, where they have a very important naval base, and in Saudi Arabia, which is their key ally in the region.

--Do you still think that the big problem of the Arab countries is the rentier economy? How much the economic factor could explain the robustness of authoritarianism and the weakness of society?--

First and foremost we have to say that rentier economy can only take place if you have an authoritarian regime: to consolidate rentier economy you need an authoritarian regime. All the discourse of promoting democracy in the Arab world without dealing with rentier economy have no meaning, because there's no

relevance with the socio-economic reality on the ground. I am shocked by this situation: few intellectuals deals with the socio-economic causes of the revolts in the Arab world, and almost no political forces developed a kind of counter economic discourse against the hegemonic one, i.e. the rentier view of the economy. You have to analyze the demographic structures of the people who went to the streets: of course you have the bourgeoisie class, this one is polarized by people who wants political liberty and free elections. But the mass of the people, 70% according to me, was poor people, whose struggle was very clear: They wanted bread, dignity, employment opportunities, as well as end to the corruption and undue concentration of wealth in the hands of a happy few. This struggle has never been economically analyzed, no one talked about changing development and economic patterns arab states are following, which are fundamentally rentier public policies consolidating the use of the rents in a few hands. My explanations is that arab young generations have been intellectually raised in a neo-liberal structure of mind: they study at Harvard, at Sorbone, at Soas, they completely get neo-liberal economy as a dominant model, and this is totally different from the experience of my generation: we studied political economy, welfare state, the distribution of wealth and the social justice. Today the new generation cannot conceive something different from neo-liberal economy, and this is a drama in my view. There's a single minded economic thinking. No one writes about how to improve social justice, how to increase competitiveness, how to really acquire science and technology, how to stop the brain drain. These are questions no one talks about. To answer the question: yes, we can also explain the lack of democracy through economical factors. When you have an economic structure totally encapsulated in such a relations of dependency on sources of rent controled by the neo-patrimonial States, of course you have to put down authoritarian structure to ensure the improvement of the country's economic performance in terms of employment and social justice. Let's look at Saudi Arabia: authoritarian regime, ruled by an ancient ruling family, bad state of human rights, not to mention woman rights. On one hand you have the Saudi family, insensitive to requests of democratization, that, to secure their reign, bolster all the US policies in the region, on the other hand we have the United States that, to ensure the oil flows, back a repressive authoritarian regime like the Saud one. As we know the story of democracy is story of putting down feudalism and rentier economic model, like the French Revolution and the industrialization that followed it all through Europe. It's very hard today, when you have dependency and interferences: if you don't consider all the interests involved (like naval base of US in Bahrein, like to guarantee oil flows,...) you can write a lot about human rights, about democratization, but you can't grasp a full knowledge of what is really going on.

We have to put economic matter at first, but unfortunately all the arabic academic works is polarized by Islam: I belong to a generation which consider Islam nor the capital factor of Arab countries, nor a problem. Today everything has changed, and the flattening on Islam is functional to a single thought we've talked while back.

Arab countries has to do like Taiwan and the South Asian countries: these were extremely poor rural countries with GDP per capita lower than that of Egypt in the early sixties, look where they are now. They acquired science and technology, they diversified their economies. Here we lack of these factors, we are still typical rentier economy: we are superficially industrialized, oil industry is a kind of enclave without connections to other sectors, we have a technological dependency, rentier mentality of easy money inhibiting business mentality of risk and competitiveness, and we also suffer from a massive brain drain, indeed there are low opportunity of works for high-skills people, that prefer to emigrate.

There were some attempts of industrialization in the Arab world: look at Muhammad Ali in Egypt in the XIXth century and Nasser also in Egypt in the XXth century, or Boumedienne in Algeria, and Saddam Hussein in Iraq last century. Under these leaders their countries developed in a spectacular and rapid degree with integration of the woman in the public and economic life, general education, diversification of economy, industrialization, social security for workers and poor people. Lots of achievements has been reached, but each of them failed for a combination of internal and external factors: Mohammed Ali because he tried to topple down the Ottoman Sultan, Nasser because was defeated in 1967 war against Israel and Saddam Hussein because he went to war against Iran to please the West and Petro-Monarchies.

--We are witnessing a climax of the sectarian divisions Sunni-Shia, due to a lot of factors: the american intervention in Iraq in 2003, the particular construction of regional States-system and, ever before, the struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Are the clash Sunni-Shia a result of the alignment of regional powers or somehow essential in the history and society of the region?--

There was a very good description of the political use by US and Saudi of these strifes in a Seymour Hersh article (in the New Yorker issue of march 2007, under the title "The Redirection"¹): the US, after seeing the disaster of the occupation of Iraq (which had the only result to increase Iranian influence in this country and in the so-called Shia Crescent), has brought themselves closer to an open confrontation with Iran, and, in order to undermine Teheran, they fueled a widening sectarian conflict between Shiite and Sunni Muslims. I mean, it's a political use of religious sectarianism: if Iran was pro-US there wouldn't have been sectarianism! Anyway that's why today Hezbollah is demonized: it's not about religion, at all, even if the Shia have been marginalized in most of the Arab world, it's not the question. The main question is the politicization of the sect, and their use to antagonize and provoking strifes.

--Talking about Syria: Is it the same situation of Arab Uprising we witnessed in Egypt and other countries? What is the role of external powers?--

No, according to me it's not the same. It was not a general uprising in Syria, at all. If you look at the map of Syria the protests were on the borders, in poor rural villages and areas, where there was discontent, because for years the economic policies of the regime, to please IMF and the US, and to open gradually to a free-market, has turned into a neo-liberal one. This has weighed on agricultural subsidies, which has been drastically cut, while the biggest success in the Assad regime has been reached in terms of self-sufficiency of food production: the rural areas were among the pillars of the regime. In addition, there had been years of drought that harmed the rural world. When the protests broke out on the borders with Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon it became a clear policy of the West and its arab allies to get rid of Assad and to topple him down: it was a big miscalculation because they didn't consider the social basis of Assad regime, their strength and the weaknesses, as well as the distribution of powers. All this came after the US and the West tried to change the behaviour of the regime in regional geopolitics: isolate Iran, stop fund Hezbollah and everything it will be ok for your regime. But Mr. Assad kept on the same line, that's why US and the West decided to get rid of him, first through Lebanon, indicting him for the Hariri assassination.

I reaffirm: Syria situation is totally different from the Uprising of other Arab countries. People of Syria is very careful of what happened in Iraq after 2003, and also of what experienced Lebanon from 1975 to 1990. They don't want a violent revolution, maybe if there were not arms and foreign fighters we could've seen an extension of this partial rural revolt, but when the syrian people saw the foreign islamists fighters and their authoritarian and anti-democratic ideology, well, it consolidated the social basis of the regime, as people became afraid of what could happen if the regime was to crumble . In addition we have to say that Mr Assad made some reforms and concessions to the internal opposition, not to the foreign one: some political prisoners has been freed and some were even coopted inside the government.

As I just said external powers are deeply involved: above all, Saudi and Turkey. They've never hide their purposes, they keep on saying "we want Bachar out", clearly and daily. I think it's all a part of a big move to weak the position of Iran, which is the direct competitor of Saudi Arabia in the Middle East, and to weak also Hezbollah, which became a big regional player.

--Talking about Hezbollah involvement in Syria: Is it a betrayal of their role of Resistance ? What about the difficulties they are facing in Lebanon to explain their role in Syria?--

I don't think they are facing difficulties. Those who don't to understand their logical behavior are simply people who just want to demonize Hezbollah. In this respect, we have to remind that the first Lebanese that went to fight in Syria from Lebanon were against the regime: a lot of Sunni extremists from the northern town of Tripoli on the border with Syria, which became a big base of Syrian opposition, stepped into the conflict. As a matter of fact Hezbollah came in quite late in the summer of 2013. In addition, if an Islamic-rule government can emerge in Syria then Hezbollah would be cut off his arms supplies and this would affect its capacity to prevent another Israeli attempt to crush them like the failed one in 2006. That's why it is very clear that Hezbollah is defending its role of Resistance, it's a logic thinking. They are the only able to placate Israel and so they need their supply routes from Syria, then they are also defending the borders of Lebanon from the infiltration of Jihadists. Preventing an extremist Islamist government to take over in Syria is also to the advantage of Lebanon who would then be completely destabilized.

I think Hezbollah is definitely acting as a Resistance force and it has defended the Lebanese borders with Syria against Islamic fighters that had began to diffuse terror in Lebanon (namely sending cars full of explosives in densely populated areas and against the Iranian embassy).

--What is the impact of the Syrian crisis on Lebanon and the nowadays situation of the country?--

As I always said Lebanon is still a buffer state for foreign battles, and it has always been like this, since it was conceived. Things changed just during Mr Lahoud office, when he was president of Republic (1998-2007). For the first time the Army was strengthened and received clear orders to support and facilitate Resistance operations against the Israeli occupation in Southern Lebanon. For the first time the Lebanese army got a clear military doctrine. That has allowed the process to get the withdraw of Israel in 2000, without any counterparts: this is a great achievement, because Lebanon regained his sovereignty over illegally occupied territories. Furthermore Mr Lahoud reined in the actions of Mr Hariri, which is a strict ally of the West and Saudi Arabia trying to bring Lebanon as a blind ally of Western/Arab policies in the region.

That's why Mr Lahoud was antagonized by the West, especially by France, where the relations between President Chirac and Mr Hariri were quite odd. I would like to remind that Mr Chirac, in one of his last visit to Lebanon in 2002 claimed that the Syrian army should only withdraw from Lebanon when Palestine-Israel conflict will have been solved, then in 2004 he suddenly changed his mind and together with the USA maneuvered to have Syria out of Lebanon through Resolution 1559 of the Security Council in September 2004!

Keeping on answering the question, what I personally believe is that as long as we have sectarian system inside Lebanon we will remain a kind of buffer state, and, as long as we have a powerful oligarchy, financially and politically, which is dominating the country we cannot have a performing and equitable tax system in order to finance a powerful army: and this is why I believe having Hezbollah, which doesn't cost to the state, is the best counterbalance to Israel. The Lebanese who doesn't see this equation are blind.

There are a lot of Christians now standing with Hezbollah. Now we have the tendency to analyze everything in terms of sectarianism, but it's not right like this. The Hezbollah is now protected by an implicit alliance of secular, Christians, Sunni, Druzes and Shia people, of every walk-of-life. Let me say this: the problem of Lebanon is not Hezbollah, the real problem is all the ruling class that believes, in a typical Saudi way, that the state is something of their own patrimony: they consider the wealth of the state as if it's the one of their pocket! This way of doing politics has been well-represented in Lebanon by Mr Hariri: as he lived in Saudi Arabia for years, he behaved like a Saudi monarch believing that the State institutions were his personal patrimony and that of his domestic political allies in the sectarian system and the financial oligarchy of the country. And, unfortunately, this behaviour tend to become common sense in the today's ruling classes.

The communitarism system allows the corruption to become a system, because you can never hold accountable a political leader who presents himself as defending the “honour” of Christians, Sunnis,... it is just appearance to hide that you are robbing your country all time long!

--What about Special Tribunal for Lebanon?--

It's simply a joke, it doesn't serve the noble cause of International Justice. Up to now the 4 Lebanese generals and 15 ordinary Lebanese put in jail under false testimony, for 4 years, weren't compensated and were not apologized: this sounds incredible! And those who are perjuring are still protected by Western powers. Definitely it's an act against the sovereignty of Lebanon, unconstitutional, the request of the president of Republic, who is supposed by constitution to conduct negotiations of international treaty, to amend the draft treaty instituting the tribunal were not taken in account by the UN, the treaty was also not approved by Parliament. So it's a de facto instrument used to influence internal affairs of Lebanon, just to create pressure against Syria before, and now against Hezbollah who is being accused of carrying the assassination of Hariri. What is more outrageous is that Lebanon pays every year for this the equivalent of the whole budget of the Ministry of Justice! International penal courts are created to judge those responsible of crimes of war, genocide, mass murder and forced displacement of population. It is improper to create such courts to judge political assassination. A few months after Hariri assassination, there was the assassination of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan, nobody asked to institute a special international court to identify and judge the killers

– About Palestine: By now, which is the probable scenario? You said: “Arabs are asked to understand and to accept Israeli dynamics that shocked their own lives, without Arabs had never been in charged with the Shoah” What do you mean with this?--

We as Arabs are not concerned with the Shoah, it's not our problem. All the Jews in Arab world were well-preserved, that's an European problem. I analyze it in my books. There was a transfer of normal Jewish hostility vis à vis the Germans and the Europeans who perpetrated the genocide during World War II towards the Arabs in Palestine: but we have nothing to do with the mass extermination of the Jews, we cannot be considered in charge with this! And also we cannot feel the same guilt as European people rightly do. It's very simple: as the Arab people and their culture have never been part to European antisemitism culminating with the genocide, we can not be asked to develop a kind of artificial sensibility toward the Holocaust in order to understand the Israel's demands of security. We are naturally concerned to the misery that has affected the Palestinian people since the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 and with the misery we suffered ourselves in Lebanon on the hand of the Israeli army and its cruel operations and occupation on our soil from 1978 to 2000 and then again in 2006.

Talking about Palestine-Israeli problem, I think the only solution is the One-State solution: it would take 20, 30, 40 years, I really don't know. What I know is that Palestinians and Israelis can live together, just see to the various initiatives like the Palestinian-Israeli Orchestra: the problem is the Israeli leadership and the full support of its occupation and settlement policies it receives from Western countries. Anyway it would mean to call into question the Zionist idea, but we've got a lot of Zionists that are not Jewish, and they are well-represented in the lobbies and governments, and a lot of Jewish non-Zionist, which is actually silenced and backgrounded! This is a paradoxical situation!

--YOU STUDY THE CATEGORY THROUGH WHICH MIDDLE EAST IS ANALYZED AND THE WAY THE WESTERN PEOPLE GET THE MIDDLE EAST: ALL IS FLAT ON RELIGIOUS

ELEMENTS. HOW HAS THIS CONTRIBUTED TO THE FRAGMENTATION-WEAKNESS OF ARAB WORLD AND TO REPRODUCE A POWER VACUUM?--

Well, the big change happened when Soviet Union collapsed: in the past there were a lot of Arabs going to study in Soviet Union and in Central Europe, which was under Moscow domination. All these Arabs came back with a socialist background, well-meaning, anti-imperialists and secularists. Now, in the last 30 years, you have people going to study just in the West: when they come back are deeply involved in neo-liberal mind, and their categories of thoughts are also shaped by Western and UN agenda! The vacuum is that an Arab agenda still doesn't exist or is totally flattened in most cases on Western one! So you have a lot of good works that are not on the main trend, that do not consider political Islam as the main factor of Arab world: nobody takes care of these in academia or in the media! Personally I'm really happy to see people reading my books and articles, that are totally out of the mainstream agenda, although my writings are inspired by my creed in humanistic values!

That's why I avoid to talk with European or US representatives: because they hear you just in the case you tell them what they would like to hear. But on the contrary if you have different views they tend to disregard them. This is the typical form-mentis of the Western-knowledge: this is the cultural system, which reproduces the stereotyped kind of knowledge about the Middle East that the late Edward Saïd criticized radically in his famous book "Orientalism".

We can just change this kind of Big Narration through the achievements of the Arab Uprising: it could be also considered the beginning of a collective counter narration. It's not over, it is still ongoing: I was in Egypt a while ago and people told me they're waiting for a third wave of revolution! I think the idea of social justice can unite underclasses and middle classes, religious and secularists, poor people and working classes, as well as enlightened bourgeoisie: we need to give substance to revolutionary discourses, in order to recompose and bring back together the forces of change.

[1 http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/03/05/070305fa_fact_hersh](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/03/05/070305fa_fact_hersh)

<http://www.infoaut.org/index.php/blog/appfondimenti/item/11958-dialoghi-con-georges-corm/11958-dialoghi-con-georges-corm?start=1>