

## **Istanbul Seminar - June 2015**

### **The crisis of Arab States, Ethics and Citizenship**

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Since the eighteenth century, Western Nation States have put growing pressures on Eastern States to modernize their political institutions. This endeavor was not innocent, but part of the imperial policies of these nations outside Europe. It was a way to increase their influence abroad and to impose their hegemony on weakened political entities outside Europe. This was especially the case *vis à vis* the Ottoman Empire. France, Great Britain and Russia were putting tremendous pressure on the Ottoman Sultan to reform the Sultanate institutions and grant equal status to both Moslems and non Moslems in the Sultanate.

By the end of the twentieth century, the United States as the most powerful nation on earth have devoted a great energy under the presidency of George W. Bush to reshape and reform the Middle East, in particular the Arab States. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 by a military coalition led by the US army was part of these efforts to reshape the Middle East and modernize its political entities along democratic principles. This invasion was motivated by the will to eradicate growing terrorism originating from the Middle East.

These efforts reminded me of the former European efforts during all the XIXth century to reform the Ottoman Empire reigning on the Middle East. Present and past efforts, however, did not yield any results. The Ottoman Empire crumbled and disintegrated in a terrible blood bath that culminated with the Armenian genocide and forced transfers of population between Greece and the new Turkey that emerged from the disappearance of the Empire. Nowadays, under US reform attempts, many key Arab States are presently disintegrating in unlimited violence, destructions, massacre of minorities, and flows of refugees flying out of violence.

We will attempt here to identify the main causes of this patent new failure to secure peace and stability in this part of the world that is also a strategic geographical cross roads in the world economy, as well as the greatest energy reservoir and the origin of the three monotheistic faiths (Judaism, Christianity and Islam). We will also examine how far the new destabilization process of the Middle East is linked to the decline of the Nation State and of the political and social ethics that have been derived during the two last centuries from the notion of citizenship.

#### **The three pillars of the Middle East: Persians, Turks, Arabs**

Three main “nations” constitute the Middle East: The Turkish people, the Persian people and the Arab people. The Persian Empire is the oldest political entity in the Middle East that survived all the invasions, as well as demographic and political changes that affected

the region. The Turks since the XIIth century have become a main dominating force before declining as Ottomans, but reconstructing a modern and strong Nation State under the leadership of Mustapha Kemal.

As for the Arabs, they have been the builders in the eight and ninth centuries of two great multinational empires, the Umayyad and Abbasid. The reign of these two empires did not last for long. By the end of tenth century, the Abbasid Empire was beginning to decompose in different political entities managed by the Persian or Turkish praetorian guards of the Arab Caliphate. Arab strength continued longer in Andalusia and North Africa, but in the Eastern Mediterranean region, except of the Fatimide Caliphate in Egypt who lasted ..., the Arabs were *de facto* evicted as rulers of the Middle East power structures. Arab societies in the last seven centuries were thus dominated by other political entities and namely the Ottoman Empire since the beginning of the XVIth century. They were not able to accumulate political experience as to how to manage political entities or to conduct wars which was not the case with Persians and Ottoman Turks.

At the end of World War I, instead of being granted the right to self determination and in spite of their aspiration to become unified under a monarchical system, Arabs societies in the Eastern Mediterranean region were put under French and British colonial rules in different political entities of heterogeneous size, resources and population. The right of self determination was not granted to them. When they accessed independence after World War II, the Arab States were weak, especially in terms of political and military capacity to manage a modern State. They formed the Arab League as a second best choice available to them to secure common policies and solidarity. More than half of Arab Palestinian territory was lost to the Zionist movement who created the State of Israel, after easily crushing all the weak and inefficient Arab armies. In 1967, this was again the case and the proof of the historical weaknesses and lack of experience of Arab elites in managing a modern State. The failure of the Egyptian-Syrian Union from 1961 to 1963 also caused a profound wound in the Arab aspirations to unity.

In this context, radical and revolutionary ideologies of secular nature developed in the Eastern Arab societies since the early days of independence, as the region was being destabilized by a wave of military coups d'Etat. At the same time Soviet and socialist ideologies developed in this part of the Middle East. In consequence the United States became preoccupied and took the pretext of the "vacuum of power" in this sub-region to increase its influence and to encourage political Islam in the Arab and the Moslem world as an antidote to the extension of communist influence. This policy climaxed with Zbigniew Brzezinski, the influential National Security Advisor of President Jimmy Carter (1977-1981) theorizing the need to mobilize and instrumentalize religion to fight communism. The policy was implemented with the help of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in the recruitment and military and ideological training of thousands of Arab and Moslem fighters to combat the Soviet army in Afghanistan under the banner of defending Islam and crushing atheist invaders of this country. The Saudi millionaire Oussama Ben Laden will become the hero of this war and he formed Al Quaëda brigades that will later turn into an international terrorist organization.

### *The historical emergence of Arab political Islam*

Political Islam appeared after World War I through both the emergence of the Saudi Kingdom with its brand of extremely rigorous Wahhabi practice of Islam and the constitution in Egypt of the Moslem Brotherhood. Both events appeared simultaneously in the twenties of last century and in my view they are interlinked, although this needs to be adequately documented.

In fact, Moslem Brotherhood acquired a high profile in Egypt after World War II. It opposed fiercely the Nasserite ideological and political hegemony that was taking place in the 50's and 60's of last century. The Movement was also influenced by the Moslem Indian radical thinker, Aboul Ala Al Mawdoudi, advocating that Moslems should only live in societies dominated by Moslem laws implemented in a radical way so as to maintain its purity. Mawdoudi was also highly influential in the Indian Moslem separatist movement that succeeded in creating the State of Pakistan (i.e. the State of the "Pures" or "unadulterated"). Moslem Brotherhood was considered as a force of counter revolution, the more so that Western Governments were supporting them and condemning their repression. Members of the Brotherhood would easily find refuge in Western capitals from domestic repression.

The anti-modernist new Islamic trends were stimulated by two important factors. The first one relates to the Cold War and the instrumentalization of religion that we just mentioned. The second one was the Iranian revolution of 1979 from which part of the religious establishment succeeded in creating the new political regime of the *Wilayet Faqih*, i.e. the control of the clerics on the functioning on the new political institutions. This new regime gave priority to addressing the question of the poor and marginal people as well as the issue of Palestine to be liberated from Israeli occupation. On the other hand, and at the same time, conservative monarchies in the Arabian Peninsula launched a drive for a "Moslem Revival" (*sahouat islamiyya*) that will compensate for all the shameful failures of the Arab secular nationalist ideology and Arab regimes who endorsed it.

Islamic radicalism became the new ideology dominating the intellectual, academic and media scene. September 2001 terrorist attacks in Washington and New York and the subsequent wars of invasion of George W. Bush in Afghanistan and Iraq gave a big boost to radical political Islam. It also boosted the perverse theory of Samuel Huntington on the clash of civilization that tended to become a self fulfilling prophecy. At the same time the notion of Arab nation and thus the notion of a collective Arab consciousness began to disintegrate to profit of transnational Moslem identity. The dream to realize citizenship attached to the existence of a nation began to vanish. Arab identity was melted in an exclusive religious conscience.

## **The main problems that contributed to more weakening of Arab States**

This was the more so that many problems affected the existence of the different Arab States suffering from congenital weaknesses. Among them are the traditional problems of non Arab and non Moslem minorities. Since the early XIXth centuries, minorities in the Ottoman Empire have been instrumentalized by European powers who attempted at increasing their influence inside the Empire through granting protections to minorities. After the independence, minority problems did not disappear. In the Mashrek countries, Turkey and Iran, the existence of large Kurdish groups fragmented between several different States continues to pose grave problems until to-day. In Egypt the Christian Coptic minority is exposed from time to time to localized persecutions fueled by the Moslem Brotherhood. In Lebanon, the political sectarian system by which power is distributed between the various religious groups has prevented the emergence of citizenship. In the Maghreb countries, the main minority problem is that of non Arabic speaking Berbers (or the Amazigh).

As citizenship did not really develop in this part of the world (to the exception now eroded of modern Turkey), the problems of distributing political power between religious and ethnic groups have become more and more a headache and a source of sectarian violence or tensions. The political regime that the US created in Iraq after its invasion of this country created deep sectarian feelings, especially between Sunnis and Shia. The creation of a semi-autonomous Kurdish region did, however, alleviate tensions between Arabs and Kurds, but not between the central Iraqi government and the Kurdish leadership of the autonomous region.

The second problem that has developed in the last decade is the one related to Sunni/Shia rivalry reflecting regional tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In fact, the Iranian popular revolution of 1978-1979 was confiscated by part of the Shia clerics under the leadership of Imam Khomeini. He instituted the Islamic regime based on the control of the functioning of public institutions by the clerics (*Wilayet Faqih*). This was not the first Islamic regime created in modern times. The Saudi monarchy created in the twenties of last century is based on a very radical interpretation of Islamic law (*Wahhabism*), while Pakistan laws and *raison d'être* are also Sharia based in a very conservative approach. The new Iranian regime was very negatively viewed by Saudi Arabia and this created sharp tensions in the Arab Levant between Shia and Sunni communities that are being exploited in the continuous geopolitical rivalries that continue to affect the stability of the region. The demonization of Iran by Western countries and Arab regimes allied to them has also been a cause of tensions and the pretext for foreign and local intervention in conflict situations inside Arab countries. These situations have multiplied and degenerated in many instances in violent conflicts, like in Syria, Libya, Yemen, Iraq, especially following the Arab wave of social and political protest in early 2011.

This use of religion in the region has also been stimulated by the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 with the support of Western countries that is still on the increase, in spite of the permanent occupation by Israel of what was left of Palestinian territory during the

1967 Arab/Israeli war. In spite of Israel not accepting to implement UN resolutions and to respect standard international law on occupied territories, as well as humanitarian law, the support of Western countries has been on the increase. Israel is now openly claiming that it is a “Jewish” state. This reinforces the claims of other States in the region to be Moslem States.

In Turkey, the Islamic party of AKP has now been in power for more than 13 years suppressing in a creeping way the secular nature of both Turkish society and Turkish State. The AKP leadership has developed the notion of Neo Ottomanism, meaning that Turkey is targeting to extend its hegemony to the former Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire.

This regrettable evolution towards more instrumentalization of religion in the Middle East constitutes a formidable obstacle to implementing the notion of secular citizenship with all the Human rights attached to it since the French Revolution. Presently, the disastrous conflict in Syria and in Iraq that has attracted so many regional and international military interferences is a reflection of the chaos existing in the region. Islam is advocated by many ferocious opposition groups in Syria that have been categorized as terrorist organizations.

The battle for Syria has also become a scene where the fate of the international system is at stake: will the international scene continue to be dominated by one sole superpower, i.e. the US and its NATO allies or are we going to see a more multi polar world develop whereby Russia, China, Iran and other large emerging countries, members of the BRICs Group, will balance the Western hegemony? This is a battle with no rules or restraint that is destroying the social fabric of the Syrian society, in addition to destruction of human life, infrastructures, housing, economic potential.

Finally, we have to evoke the dramatic failures of Arab States and societies to industrialize and to secure a minimum of degree of social justice. Economic growth and social justice have been very negatively affected by “rentier” system that has generalized in the last half century. This rentier system based on exploiting natural resources (primarily oil and gas), real estate rents, transport and touristic rents, but also the export of brains and cheap man power has ended in an unfair system. It is characterized by a formidable concentration of wealth in the hands of a happy few associated with royal or republican governing families. It is the extreme underperformance of this system in the field of economic and social development that has produced the many Arab revolts of year 2011 and the ensuing counter revolutions whereby political Islam received the support of Arab monarchies and Western countries to become a dominant conservative force to put in check the aspirations of the Arab societies to drastic economic, social and political reforms.

The millions of young Arabs that are unemployed and marginalized in their societies constitute the local negative environment where violent and terrorist organizations can succeed in recruiting them. The Arab region has the worst ratios of unemployment between all the regions of the world, especially within the young strata of the population.

In spite of the wealth of many Arab countries nothing has been done to correct social imbalances and secure adequate employment opportunities in sufficient numbers. With a very high number of Arab billionaires this situation is even more scandalous.

### **Reinstating social, economic and political ethics**

Economic globalization has produced a sharp increase in worldwide corruption and the subservience of democratic regime to the power of money that has accumulated in the hand of the 1% happy few that monopolize the largest share of properties and revenues in the world. In the Arab world this concentration of wealth is even greater than in the US or in the world average. Conflicts, violence and wars have greatly contributed to the disintegration of Arab societies and States. Political and religious liberties, real democracy, the rule of law are all inexistent institutions. The region has been tormented by various external factors since the beginning of Western imperial age. These torments continued after independence due to the strategic location of the Middle East and its oil reserves. The existences of the State of Israel and of the Wahhabi brand of Islam that Saudi Arabia is promoting are factors of great importance in the present chaos and violence.

As long as religious identities will remain so radical and exclusive it will not be easy to reinstate the values of common citizenship and the ethics of public life as they have emerged after the French Revolution and under the influence of the Enlightenment philosophy. This philosophy was enthusiastically adopted by many Arabs, Turks and Iranians and it allowed a new renaissance of these three ethnic groups. Armenians, however, were massacred after World War I and the Kurdish nationalism has not yet been satisfied. In addition the rights of the Palestinian Arabs to self determination are being totally denied by the State of Israel. Members of NATO have been invading or have bombed countries in the region under the humanitarian pretext.

This is not the adequate context to rebuild the Middle East and reintroduce international, regional and local ethics and code of conduct to re-establish peace and stability in this part of the world.

Without ethic rules, the present globalization and militarization trends that characterize our new century will continue to fuel violence and disintegration of societies.

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