The following is the text of an interview with Hazem Saghieh, senior columnist and editor at the London-based Al-Hayat Daily. Saghieh is founder and editor of the weekly political supplement *Tayyarat* and he contributes a weekly column as well as political analyses. Saghieh has published several books on Lebanon, Arabism, and political Islam. He is a prolific writer with multi-sided interests. His publications include: Maronites from Lebanon; Arabs between Stones and Corn: Cracks in a Mainstream Culture; Dawn of Arabism: the Majority Replaces the Minority; Khomeini's Culture: A stance to Orientalism or Fighting Spectres?; Iraq's Ba'ath: The rise and fall of Saddam's Power; Splintering of the Arabic Mashriq; This is not a Biography; and Perpetual Collapse: The Historical Context of Uprisings in the Arab Middle East.

Soon after the independence of the countries of the Arabic Mashriq, pan-Arab nationalist and Ba'athist parties came to power. Their first political engagement was directed at suppressing and rendering any strive for democracy dysfunctional. They did this under the pretext of fighting against the colonial West and Imperialism. These parties consolidated the cornerstones of the despotic military rule that governs the people in this geographic region of the world. Until today, people have not been able to free themselves from these despotic regimes, despite attempts in the recent past few years to change this status quo. The result was civil wars as well as forced displacement based on ethnic and religious grounds, as is happening in Syrian and Iraq.

The entry point to this discussion is to examine the first contacts between Europe and us in the form of colonialism after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman Empire left behind a great number of people and vast territories that were in need for political receptacles. The French and British mandates came to this region equipped with a long experience that culminated in their perception of the nation-state as the political receptacle. They brought this concept with them and tried to place the people and territories of this region within nation-states. They did well sometimes and bad at other times when judged by the realization of their interests, which dictated the specific delineations of these nation-states. The bottom line is that their practice was a reflection of socio-political notions that resulted from their historical knowledge of the nation-state.

In my view – which is contrary to that of pan-Arab nationalists – colonialism was not part of this perception. Here, we encounter two fallacies. First, there was no Arab unity originally, but there was the Ottoman state that, in turn, collapsed. In other words, there wasn't any divided entity that then needed to be unified. Second, had the inhabitants of the region been given the choice, they would have opted for the formation of smaller political entities. For example, in 1920, colonialism created one country for Muslims and Christians to live in. Had it been left to the people of the region, they would have created countries even smaller than Lebanon. Part of Kurdistan was appended to Arab Iraq, and part of Africa to Arab Sudan.

The most crucial phase is the one during which "post-independence" regimes first emerge. All peoples and nations have shaky starts. A political situation is created that would reduce the magnitude of fanaticism that prevails among people, and which is not limited to the sectarian realm, but probably also includes an ethnic dimension, as is the case with the Kurds, or a regional one, as the case of Libya shows.

The course these new, independent regimes took, especially the military regimes, led to a sort of congruence between the group in power and one respective fanatic group within society. For

example, the rule of the Iraqi Ba'ath became synonymous with Sunni rule, and that of the Syrian Ba'ath with Alawite rule, while Lebanese independence became tantamount to the rule of the Maronites. This created a feeling of aversion among other segments within these countries, especially among those with a historical background of rejection toward the country's other components, such as Lebanon's Muslims. Sunni Muslims in Lebanon, in Tripoli and Akkar for example, maintained commercial and blood relations with Homs in Syria; Shiites in South Lebanon were in contact with Palestine. Yet, these groups found themselves drawn to a Beirut-based center with which they did not have any real connections, or emotional ties. Nonetheless, they were expected to demonstrate their loyalty to this center that was alien to them in terms of their emotions, history, and interests.

There may have been a probability to reduce these weaknesses and conflicts of interest if they would have been faced by other types of regimes, or if colonialism would have lasted longer. However, colonialism was incapable of bringing about real changeovers in the political and social conditions in the regions it governed. We ended up with military and ideological regimes that force the communal groups under their rule into conformity. The ideological nature of these regimes (in the era of modernism, it has become embarrassing for people to express one's sectarian or tribal affiliation) can be explained by the existence of a "non-consciousness" at the sectarian level – if I can put it this way – that worked to the favor of establishing a consciousness at the ideological level. So, instead of saying, "I am Sunni" in Lebanon, one would say, "I am a pan-Arab nationalist."

Those who adopted modern ideologies did so because they considered them a means to break with their communal backgrounds, although they may not have necessarily been fully aware of this. In Lebanon, for example, it was not a coincidence that every Sunni was a Nasserist, and every Christian a supporter of Chamoun.

Military ideological regimes, especially in Syria and Iraq, and partially in Libya, used the notions of the "one people" and pan-Arabism as pretexts for their actions, while at the same time they eliminated the national consciousness of their societies. A Syrian would be ashamed of his Syrian identity and would, therefore, stress on his identity as an Arab. From yet another side, these regimes increasingly destroyed repressed identities that then grew in intensity and strength underground. In effect, nobody could see what was happening under the rules of Saddam Hussein and Hafez al-Assad, who were at the top of societies, and who prevented these repressed identities from declaring their existence and all that made them differ.

Iraq and Syria can be taken as examples of states that deny their sectarian nature. In both, one finds a permanent incapability of governing state affairs. For example, Syria obtained its independence from France in 1946. In 1949 there was a first military coup d'état, and then there were two countercoups. The first countercoup was led by Adib Shishakli in 1954; the second took place in 1955 in the course of the struggle between the National Block and the People's Party. In 1958, Syrians found themselves incapable of governing their country, so they handed their governance affairs over to Gamal Abdel Nasser. This is how the union between Syria and Egypt happened. In 1961, there was a coup against Syria's union with Egypt, and then a countercoup. In 1963, the Ba'ath party carried out an internal coup and liquidated colleague party members. In 1966, the Iraqi Ba'athist Left carried out a coup against the Ba'athist Right. What prevented this formation from becoming a political entity were struggles at the levels of sectarian groups and regions. Such struggles included the urban-rural conflicts, and the bitter

inner Syrian dispute between Damascus and Aleppo, which revolves around the denomination of Aleppo as the "capital of the north" in a depreciative hint at Damascus. The intention is to express that Aleppo with its history and commercial relations with Turkey and Iraq is the real capital and not Damascus, which maintains relations with Jordan, Lebanon, and Palestine.

It was not a coincidence that Saddam Hussein in 1968 and Hafez al-Assad in 1970 saw themselves confronted with the bitter truth to either form a pluralist country, in which all sides would be asked to participate in setting up a democratic rule, or to form a quasi totalitarian rule that would preserve the unity of society. At the same time, the already prevailing contradictions were left to simmer beneath the surface. It was also not a coincidence at all that Saddam called himself vice-president, and not president, and that he ruled Iraq with excessive brutality. Hafez al-Assad ruled Syria in the same fashion, and during the same time period. Since that time, the peoples of these countries have been treated like slaves, not citizens.

When Saddam Hussein's regime was toppled and the revolution in Syria began, we did not know what was truly happening in these two countries. We knew that they had fought wars and staved off assaults. We would read a thousand news items on Syria's resilience, its attacks and counter-attacks before we could read a single story about the situation of health or education in Syria. These countries resembled strategic functions rather than homelands where people learned, educated their children, worked, and got married; the features of life had been obscured. The truth came out after these regimes fell, and everything that was hidden and repressed surfaced. It was not only revolutions and U.S. occupation that made the truth come out but also any exposure of such a repressive regime exposed it for what it is.

This reality can be exemplified with a son one has, but whom one does not feed, respect, or educates. Instead, one hits and insults this son who, then, revolts. From a historical and political perspective, this son has every right to rebel. However, following a history of subjugation, oppression, insults, deprivation, and dehumanization, this son became half insane. I am with this son and against a father of that sort, but I reiterate that this son has taken damage. This is the metaphor of the Arab Spring. The regimes led the societies to the state they are in today, and these societies have every right to rid themselves of these regimes that have destroyed them.

You did not clarify your stance on the issue of colonialism and its founding of the Mashriq countries, and whether that, in your opinion, constitutes a good or a bad choice. Or, as you also pointed out, occupation had no chance of introducing a political or civil project, etc. that would have enabled the societies under their control to keep up with modernity in the Western sense. At the same time, we find that colonialism had an extensive presence in countries such as Tunisia and Algeria in North Africa, and that these countries face problems that are similar to the ones we face here, in our region. Wouldn't you agree that the success or failure of these countries is not determined by the duration of colonization?

I can only give you what I have. To my understanding, the nation-state was brought by colonialism, presenting its model to the Arabs. Here, we notice a historical flaw that originated in Europe, and that reached us through the process of our self-transformation. We did not have any another option, because we could not have lived during the twentieth century without walking this path. The era of empires had ended with the collapse of the Ottoman and the Austro-Hungarian Empires, while Russian tsardom reproduced itself through Soviet communism.

In this region, it is not possible to leave matters to develop in their own way, because the result would be the emergence of tribal states. The level of acceptance of the Western model also varied. Lebanon's Christians, for example, welcomed this state form because they wanted to imitate the West. The Sunnis of Iraq had cadres capable of governing the country, especially after the Shiites had committed their famous mistake of venturing into the Iraqi revolt against the British in 1920 that ended in pushing the Shiites out of the political game. In Algeria, the main cities were in the hands of the French. The struggle against the French exacerbated, and violence was used in the countryside. Colonial style settlement spread, because when the French came to Algeria, they considered it part of France; they were willing to grant the Algerians French citizenship on the condition that they give up Islamic Sharia. The Algerians refused this deal at the time, though it would have been better if they would not have.

In my opinion, if you look into our relationship with the West, you will find a problem that is not specific to the non-Arab Muslims, such as Malaysia and Indonesia. Rather, more precisely, the problem arises in connection with the Muslims of the Mediterranean region. This is the only region that had early relations with Europe, and which enjoyed periods during which it had been better off than Europe. Take the crusades as an example, where "we" were victorious over the Europeans; and before that, "we" seized Andalusia. It seems that the social organization that prevailed in this region was more advanced than social organizations in Europe, even at the cultural and intellectual levels. It was through "us" that the sciences of ancient Greece reached Europe. Also, let us not disregard the role the philosophy of Averroes played in later changes that occurred in Europe and affected Christian consciousness. But then, later on, the situation turned to our disadvantage, and it was the hardest for "us" – more than for any other people – to come to terms with these overturns. Japan, for example, only came in contact with the West as late as the nineteenth century, while Africa is not in a position to boast of its relationship with Europe at all. Hence, in the Arab-Islamic consciousness, we always had a tendency toward distinguishing ourselves on the basis of our history.

This entire process can be illustrated at the smaller level of the relationship between the Druze and the Maronites in Lebanon. The Druze were landowners in Mount Lebanon, and they brought Maronite peasants from the North of Lebanon to work the fields, and to live with them. Sometime later on, the Maronites took up the work in silk and received support from Western missionaries. Sixty or seventy years later, the Maronites exceeded the Druze, who then isolated themselves. Until today, it will be difficult to convince a Druze that Maronites are more advanced than Druze. Does the relationship we have with the West make it harder to take what it has brought us? We can't adopt the models of the state and democracy from the West, because if one person is considered bad in someone else's opinion, then it will be difficult for that person to offer anything that the other may consider good. It is not a coincidence that what influenced us did not come from France, or Britain, but that it rather came from countries that did not colonize us. We took fascism from Germany, without taking parliamentarianism from Britain and France. That is because we had accepted Germany, which was not a colonialist superpower and was an adversary to democratic countries in World Wars I and II. Germany appealed to us, and we took its ideas (hence nationalism, Ba'athism).

In 2010, popular uprisings that named the regimes for what they are – namely, dictatorships - erupted in our region. Any epithet of brutality that you might think of will fit these regimes well. These uprisings started without any clear idea of the path they would take. However, they emerged from within the general notion that these regimes must be ended. Hope, and with it the uprisings

spread from one country to another. These uprisings were less violent in some countries, like in Tunisia, than elsewhere. In others, violence turned into civil wars, which changed entire demographics, as happened in Syria and Iraq.

First of all, we need to distinguish between the demand for freedom on the one side, and the demand for democracy on the other side. The concept of freedom is applicable to anyone who wants to be free. The Arab uprisings, in general, erupted to demand freedom and bread, but not democracy. The latter is an institutional concept that requires an understanding of political processes and transformations. The implementation of this concept requires certain requisites to be in place, but these do not exist in these states. When we want to build a democratic system, we need to start by reaching a certain degree of popular agreement and consensus, despite the dominating sectarian and ethnic divides.

In Tunisia, the demand for democracy succeeded, to some extent, because the country possesses some elements that are non-existent in other countries. First of all, there is a religious and sectarian homogeneity. Second, the oppression of the Tunisian people under the rule of Ben Ali was less than that practiced by the regimes of al-Assad and Qaddafi. Third, Tunisia experienced the rule of Bourguiba under which access to education expanded, the middle class grew – eighty percent of Tunisians owned homes – women were given their rights, and Tunisia opened up to the Western culture. Fourth, Tunisia is close to and in contact with Europe. Fifth, Tunisia is far from the Arab-Israeli conflict and its tensions. This is why Tunisia could leap from the stage of demanding freedom, to demanding democracy. In addition to the absence of a crisis with Europe, a precondition for establishing a democracy is the existence of a genuine people, not peoples that are unable to rise to a state of being one. Tunisia is different in that sense.

In our region, the situation is a different one. There is a demand for freedom, but without any horizon in sight. We all want to be free from each other. The Syrian people, for example, does not seek freedom from al-Assad alone, but the Kurds also want to be free from the Arabs, and the people of Aleppo want to be free from the people of Damascus, and so on.

Tunisia was also a country of rule of law, at least under Bourguiba. The country passed solid laws, such as the civil status law that is considered a principal factor in the transformation of the Tunisian society, specifically with regard to the relation between women and men, and women being able to enjoy their rights. Also, as said earlier, the expansion of the middle class and the increased ownership of houses are considered considerable gains. In fact, these achievements can be attributed to Tunisia's relation with Europe, which maintained a soft tone with Bourguiba's regime. When Bourguiba was fighting the battle for Tunisia's independence, he advocated two fundamental matters. The first was to maintain a peaceful, gradual pace in building Tunisia's independence. The second was that independence would severe Tunisia's ties with the French culture. An independence in which losses exceed gains is meaningless. The Arab Mashriq's political movements that identify themselves with leading on the struggle (Harakat Nidal) use violence, or they glorify it, and they oppose the West to an extent that causes this political animosity to spill over into the realm of political practice. I understand well that these movements are in many aspects in discordance with the West, including the Western support of Israel. But it is not comprehensible that this disaccord grows to the point of becoming a way of life and culture; if women in the West are free, they should be oppressed here because one is against the West, and if the West is secular, then here one should hold on to religion. But this is what happened, and the nationalist regimes paved the path for this to happen, and it was to the

benefit of Islamist movements. It is as if we wanted a non-Western model, but we only have Islam as an idealized blueprint to ensure that we differ from the West.

The Iranian revolution of 1979 built on the Islamic model. This exacerbates the disintegration of communal groups (Sunnis and Shiites) and prevents them from forming one people. Economic, social, and political gains, among others, are preconditions for the unification of a people. This is difficult to achieve without balanced relations with the West, because the West is the source of such gains. When I speak of the relation between men and women, the implicit model I have in mind is a Western one. When I think of social justice and a growing middle class, I implicitly, or explicitly, refer to the Western model.

The people have not become [a real] people. If there were three people who hate hyenas, and a hyena came, then the three of them would fight it. This means they hate the hyena and will fight it, but at the same time they will also hurt each other. To give an example, when Aleppo, or Homs, was attacked by the Syrian regime, the opposition advocated endurance and solidarity. But when there was a battle in Damascus, Damascenes in the Syrian National Council demanded that their city be spared. Opposition members who came from Homs and Aleppo objected, because such a demand was not brought forward when battles took place in Aleppo and Homs. This divergence shows that they [Syrians] are not one people, but that they are communal groups that were oppressed by the regime, and who now rose to demand freedom. This is very natural and human, but there is a huge gap between the current state of being and the notion of a people and democracy at the political level. Probably, the most salient materialization of this gap is civil war, which either brings out a people, or increases the divisions in varying political and constitutional weights and forms. The situation in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq could be described as unhappy marriages that are prohibited to divorce.

After the fall of the regimes in some countries, such as Egypt and Tunisia, elections took place to form new, alternative governments. "Political Islam" emerged from these elections as the strongest current, because it was the most organized when compared to marginal, disorganized secular leftist parties, as well as civil labor unions. As events unfolded after 2011, and Islamists acceded to power through elections, and then were overthrown, the secular-Islamist dualism that existed before the fall of the overthrown regimes re-emerged. Here, we have two trends. One is secular and despotic, and ruled for more than 50 years, and the other is Islamist, despotic, and cannot be reconciled with democracy. What is the origin of this dualism?

Two influential intellectual traditions have existed in the region for the past one hundred years. One called for political Islam. This tradition started with the Muslim Brotherhood that was founded by Hassan al-Banna in 1928 in the city of Ismailia. It was not a coincidence that Ismailia was chosen as the movement's cradle. On the one hand, it was a center for the British forces in Egypt, and on the other, it was also the center for Christian missionary institutions. Hence, the city combined the two main features that influenced the movement's development, becoming culturally, politically, and also militarily opposed to the West.

The other tradition revolved around groups that were affected by and expanded as a result of their relation with Western calls, specifically those related to women's emancipation. These groups were unable to secure an independent positioning and, therefore, placed themselves in alignment with the military. This paved the way for the emergence of influential democratic or

liberal movements. For example, Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid,[1] the forefather of Arab enlightenment, was unable to gain a seat in the Egyptian parliament. Kamil Chadirji in Iraq, founder of a socialist democratic liberal party, became a proponent of military coups. Hence, the groups within this spectrum aligned themselves with the military rule to protect themselves from political Islam, for only the military could curb political Islam. This is the dualism that governed the region: Abdel Nasser and the Ba'ath, etc., versus the Muslim Brotherhood, etc. This is a belligerent and not a political schism, and the ensuing divide prevailed for decades without political life being capable of containing it.

In Europe, the division is that of socialist democratic and Christian democratic traditions, or labor and conservative traditions. But political life in Europe was able to absorb this division, not by means of civil war or military coups, but rather through fair elections. Taking a look at our region, one may take the Iraqi experience as an example. After the overthrow of Saddam, the elections that took place were not conducted for the purpose of reorganizing political life, but they rather served as a carrier of messages, where the Shiites would signal to Sunnis, "we are more numerous than you are," and Sunnis to Shiites, "there are more of us than you might think." Instead of leading to the establishment of democratic institutions that contribute to the release of tensions, the elections shifted the struggle to the inside of these institutions in extension to the civil conflict that prevails within the Iraqi society. This is the point of departure for the discourse that tries to break with this dualism; institutions that are imparted with a communal group character and thereby turned into battle fields of the civil conflict, as opposed to technical democratic elections, put to the service of political activity. Consequently, these institutions constitute part of civil war dynamics.

Let us talk about the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which is considered the result of communal and sectarian conflicts. Anyone who follows the events would know that ISIS is not more brutal, oppressive, and murderous than the Syrian regime. The world has formed an international coalition to combat ISIS, but it stood idle before the Syrian regime. Could it be that the issue of minority groups and their protection is assigned to the Syrian regime, and that it is being treated accordingly?

First of all, regarding ISIS, Trotsky once described Nazism as being made of all that Europe swallowed during the era of Renaissance, but could not digest, and hence threw up. This depiction applies to ISIS and Salafist movements. They embody everything that the region swallowed and couldn't digest, from renaissance to modernity. The region was not able to absorb the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, European hegemony over the world, military modernization that marginalized the roles of tribes, and communal divides that made Sunnis feel marginalized by the Shiites as a result of the Iranian revolution and the establishment of an Alawite regime in Syria. All these factors combined led to the emergence of ISIS. Military regimes sealed all outlets of expression except that of religion, which they could not block, and instead actively contributed to the strengthening of the religious consciousness. In Syria for example, the building of mosques greatly increased during the rule of the al-Assad regime. The Egypt of Sadat and Mubarak oppressed Islamists using different methods. Yet, this coincided

---

[1] Ahmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid, (born Jan. 15, 1872, Barqayn, Egypt—died March 5, 1963, Egypt), journalist and lawyer, a leading spokesman for Egyptian modernism in the first half of the 20th century. See: http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/351944/Ahmad-Lutfi-al-Sayyid. [Editor's note]

with the building of mosques and raising Islamic awareness as a means of compensation. The utilization of the state's ideological tools underwent a transformation; public radio stations broadcasted Friday sermons, and educational centers were deployed to spread Islamic awareness.

If one looks at all of these factors combined, one sees how extremist (takfiri) Islamism is produced. Add to that, our societies have neither engaged in real development and education efforts, nor has there been an integration of the various groups over the past one hundred years. This is the background from which ISIS emerged.

Our relation with the West and our relation with each other remain unresolved issues. We mix up the wars waged by al-Qaeda and its offspring movements, and we forget about 9/11. The United States can support wars against al-Assad, Qaddafi, or Saddam, but it pursues its own war against ISIS because of 9/11. First, a differentiation needs to be made between support provided by the U.S. for you to engage in your war, and the U.S. waging its own war. Second, relating to war and the atrocity of killing, there is a difference between the act and the perpetrator of the act. You slit throats, while I push a button to launch a chemical attack. In fact, I am more efficient than you are because I killed hundreds in a matter of seconds, while it took you several hours to slit someone's throat. This is with regard to the act itself. As for the perpetrator, you appear more vicious because you are implicated in the act, while the pushing of a button is a modern–industrial feature and its savageness is, during the execution of the act, not visible. This difference plays an essential role at the level of contemporary consciousness. One may argue that it is ferocious for a criminal regime to bomb its own people, yet this does not provoke Western citizens as much as the images that show the slitting of someone's throat, especially when making use of present-day media, and more specifically so if the victim is a Westerner. The rhetoric of ISIS and similar movements is not to be put in a geopolitical context, but rather in a context that is related to culture and stereotyping; this should not be underrated.

Concerning minority groups, the aspect that we do not pay attention to – at least as Arabs – is the Western imagination in which the Holocaust, because of the murder of six million Jews, constitutes a Western specificity. I say this in disregard of the ambitions and projects that states may pursue. There is a difference when persons are killed in the course of a political conflict, and when persons are being displaced because of their religion. Consequently, a political struggle is open and allows the West to intervene. But it is a different story when a Kurd, a Yazidi, or a Christian becomes a victim of an assault on the basis of ethnicity or religion. In other words, a soldier who died in World War II is different from a Jew who was taken from his home and transported to Auschwitz because of his religion; that Jewish person was murdered twice.

There are political conflicts, and their consequences change the image we have of these conflicts, making them larger, or scarier. But the killing of people on the basis of their religion, or gender, is a different matter that cannot be measured by the number of victims.

It is difficult to imagine what end there is in store for this region. What forms of governance or ruling systems will emerge by the end of this disastrous path that the region has embarked on since 2011. In one of your articles you wrote that what we are witnessing today is not the result of revolutions but is part of an ongoing process.

This region is situated on the borders with Europe, oil rich countries, and Israel. The world cannot tolerate for too long that the region remains in this absolute state of chaos. The system of

a nationalistic state, or a nation-state, has become dysfunctional. This system was not accepted in the first place, but ISIS has impaired this system further by annexing parts of Syria to Iraq. The Kurds also contributed to the invalidation of this system because the battle of Kobani was fought by both Syrian and Iraqi Kurds – indicating the existence of a Kurdish dimension that transcended the two states' boundaries. The international coalition further voided the meaning of the system in place when it engaged in a war against the two countries.

Even if the people of this region put up with this state of chaos, the world cannot. In my opinion, sooner or later, a map for this region will be put on the table of an international conference for discussion and remodeling. Naturally, the people of the region will be consulted to assess their willingness for a joint living, or their rejection of it. It is certain, however, that the central state model has completely collapsed. Even if there were a will to maintain these states in their current form, this would be extremely hard to achieve, because federal and con-federal structures, and probably even wide centralized authorities, have already emerged. Surely this situation will not last for long, especially since the two big problems that are keeping the region in a state of unrest have not yet been resolved: The Kurdish and the Palestinian problems. There might be an inclination to reconsider the region's map in order to resolve these pending problems by separating different communal groups from each other, and by finding solutions to the Kurdish and Palestinian problems. The reactions to this cannot be foreseen.

The Arab unity – which nobody wants –is creating a conflict between the different sides. In this situation, it would be preferable to separate these sides from each other rather than keeping them united in a state of armed conflict. These entities, in their current formation, are similar to miserable marriages that are forbidden to divorce. One day, we will have to be able to open the door to divorce.

Iran is a regional power that exercises religious influence in a geographic area that stretches from the shores of the Mediterranean Sea to the oil straight that separates it from the United Arab Emirates. Turkey's regional influence is on the rise, while being governed by an Islamic party with a leader like Erdogan who says that Islam, not Columbus, opened America. Do we have two very influential regional powers, Iran and Turkey, ready to engage in a dialogue with the West in order to negotiate the region's situation?

Why should we resort to an international solution? Because our country does not have the power to exert control over society and maintain unity, otherwise it would not have needed to venture into demanding a foreign intervention to solve its problem. The Mashriq's problem is that it is disintegrated to an extent where no one can even claim to have the capability to dominate it – l mean domination in the negative sense –, and to build and govern society. In contrast, regional powers that appear to be more capable are really not that much better. The Syrian crisis showed, for example, how frail Turkey is internally. Large Kurdish and considerable Alawite minority sentiments are on the rise, especially since the Sunnis under the guidance of the Justice and Development Party are following an Islamist approach. Saudi Arabia is also home to a number of contradictions. And any tension that originates in the Mashriq affects the entire Arab Gulf region. In Iran there are also discrepancies that should not be overlooked. The Persian ethnicity makes up only 40 percent of Iran's population, while the rest are Azeris, Arabs, and Kurds.

If this climate persists, it will break apart not only its smaller states but the entire region. The Mashriq may have followed – within its own boundaries – the ancient Greek experience of city-states. This model might be more meaningful than the nation-state, or say, the region's communal groups do not qualify for living under the rule of nation-states because their principal political loyalties are still limited to the level of sectarian and ethnic groups. Maybe the region needs to undergo such a phase in which each group becomes saturated with the feeling of being Shiite, Sunni, Christian, or Kurd; a phase in which all groups are separated from each other within the framework of a federal system. When two fight, it is better to separate them. This is the requisite for stability in the region and in its neighbor countries, which will not be able to maintain their strength if the region will remain in unrest.

You said that putting an end to the conflict will lead to a phase in which pressure on regional players will increase because of religious belief, which is the reason that causes conflict here...

In the entire region, even if to various extents, the nation-state did not succeed as a form of governance. A Saudi would introduce himself as being from Jeddah, or Riyadh, or elsewhere, before he would say that he is Saudi. These loyalties are not only regional but in many cases they bear religious and sectarian dimensions.

One of the slogans of the Green Revolution in Iran in 2009 demanded to denounce the commitment toward Palestine. If you were to conduct a survey, Iranians would say: "Why did we get involved with Hezbollah?" There is a fundamental conflict in Iran over the country's regional role, and there is no consensus. If the situation in the region, in general, remains as is, then there will be no guarantee that Kurdish and Azeri movements might not rebel; these are all elements that could contribute to Iran's disintegration. You can imagine the hell we would be living in if Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey – and even Israel, which is considered more democratic than others – are drawn into civil wars. We have to keep in mind that Israel is made up of five components: the Ashkenazi, the Sephardim, Arabs, Russians, and the rest. The entire region could be jeopardized if the many crises are not resolved, especially the ones in Syria and Iraq.

What is the origin of this religious attachment that people have in this region? Modernity had reached this region, evidence of which is the founding of modern state forms, government institutions, and hospitals. Elections took place, even in countries like Syria and Iraq, and even if only as a matter of formality. All of these modern aspects can be found in the region, and yet the only result was more social backwardness.

This is because of the regimes that governed these countries. Colonialism inherited from the Ottomans a region divided by confessional and communal groups.

Inherited or occupied?

Occupied, but also inherited as far as values and relations are concerned. During the Ottoman era, the societies in the region functioned according to Ottoman commands. What mattered was paying the poll tax [*jizyah*] and sending men to the army. We all know about Jabal al-Druze and Harat al-Nasara[2], etc.

---

[2] These names are indicative of the sectarian conflict in Lebanon and the region in general. [Editor's note]

When colonialism came to the region, this composition already existed, and colonialism found that each group held exclusive allegiance to itself, and that these groups therefore differed in the degree to which they accepted colonialism and dealt with it. In Lebanon, for example, Christians admired the West, while the remaining sectarian groups did not embrace it. Hence the West dealt with the Christians and supported them in Lebanon, and it supported the Sunnis in Iraq and made them the strongest.

So, society itself has to accept the existing differences between its communal groups and leave behind the lie of coexistence within a unified political framework...

There are historical reasons and others that are remnant of colonialism. The bottom line is that the regimes that first emerged after independence widened and consecrated these big discrepancies rather than making attempts to overcome them. This was because these regimes themselves were of an ethnic or sectarian nature. They worked toward achieving that communal groups identify themselves with the regimes, which led to an absolute absence of loyalty to the state. For example, what does Lebanon signify for the Lebanese other than folklore and lies, and what actually constitutes loyalty to Lebanon? Real loyalty in Lebanon is being faithful in allegiance to sectarian groups and the systems that were set up at all the different levels; this situation maintains the status-quo. You could be a young Shiite who is without any sectarian bias, and your parents might have worked hard to ensure your education and taken on debt to be able to send you to Europe to study medicine or engineering. But when you came back you were unable to find work without a recommendation by Nabih Berry.[3] So, you are a young Shiite man, and you are not sectarian, yet you are forced to seek help from Nabih Berry because you do want to live and pay off your parents' debts. Consequently, and objectively spoken, you have become sectarian.

And what about nationalist and liberal ideas that are saturated with Marxism, and those who believe in our liberation from imperialism?

What a coincidence it is that all of these ideological parties grew among minority groups. Sunnis, for example, did not enlist widely in political parties. Take the Syrian Social Nationalist Party as an example, and you will find that it is made up of Greek Orthodox, Shiites, and Druze. The communist movement spread, in the first place, among Christians and Shiites. All of this is of significance. These parties used minority groups as a tool to enter politics by erasing their minority-based identities. Shiites became communists, Christians became [Syrian] nationalists, and Sunnis became pan-Arab nationalists, etc. There was a tendency to mask communal identities with ideological ones.

Was this ideology promoted and built by Ba'athist and nationalist parties, or did it already exist?

It is inherent to the functioning of these parties that they make us disposed to adopting a negative attitude toward the West. Of course, Israel plays a big role in increasing this readiness. I could claim that the U.S. has a plan to spread HIV in the region. Could there be anything more fictitious than this? But there is nothing easier than claiming anything against the U.S. There is a nice anecdote to be told about something I once posted on Facebook. I wrote jokingly that Hillary Clinton had published a book in which she said that ISIS was created by the U.S. One should have taken this as a joke, but a serious writer with the al-Nahar Newspaper wrote an

---

[3] Nabi Berri is the Speaker of the Lebanese Parliament and a Shiite leader. [Editor's note]

article based on this alleged confession by Clinton. Did you know that during Mubarak's rule there once was a long debate in the Egyptian parliament, which also involved the press and public opinion forums, on how Israel was sending chewing gum to Egypt that had a double effect on Egyptians: It made women sexually needier, while it caused the opposite effect in men?

If we sum up the controversies that arose from our contact with Europe, and the ugliness of the regimes that emerged following independence as was described earlier, then we will understand the historical accumulation of anger, the feeling of estrangement from one's self, from identities, and from the homeland; we will understand the rejection of all characteristics of Arab political life. There will always be persons who do not know what they want. For instance, we do not know why the 1920 Revolution in Iraq took place. We know that those who participated in the revolution wanted to get rid of the English, but we don't know what it was they wanted to achieve. This holds true to the Arab revolutions of today. In Syria, the people do not want al-Assad to rule them, but what exactly it is they want is unclear. This is the result of not being familiar with modernity; in order to be able to suggest an alternative for the existing regimes, one needs to be in touch with contemporary political thought, as well as having a stance on the issues of liberties, economy, women's rights, and equality. This can be achieved only by persons who have established a solid connection with the ideas of the contemporary world, i.e., Western modernity.

Our current crisis of being incapable of suggesting alternatives is a result of our relation with the West. The rhetoric of members of the Syrian opposition is often reminiscent of the regime. They would mention how the Syrian opposition is neglecting the Kurdish issue, but that the Syrian opposition would give the Kurds the right to self-determination if it won. Or that the Syrian opposition will regain the Golan Heights, establish peace, and thus free the Syrian people from the cause that had been used as a pretext for the al-Assad rule. Today, if we would look at Lebanon's ongoing debate over the question of resistance, we would find that Hezbollah's opponents in the March 14 coalition do not want to get rid of resistance, but they consider that Hezbollah's model of resistance is not the right one in the fight against Israel.

In conclusion, I have a feeling that we are living in a region in which each stone is in conflict with the other, as if we had returned to the early formative stage. We have disposed of everything that modernity had brought us and went back to a phase that predates the existence of a people – a phase in which there once had been a project to become a people.

I have toured 13 Lebanese areas, none of which accepts the other. I will publish a book called the "Many Lebanese Peoples" which speaks of a civil war at the various levels; its content can be generalized to apply to the entire Arab world, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Arab Gulf.