The following is the selected text of an interview conducted with Wissam Sa'adeh.

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Four years after the so called 'Arab Spring' began it has become clear that there is a surge and spread of Islamist movements, especially Jihadist movements. Some attribute this surge to the return of dictatorships, such as in the case of Egypt, others see it as a result of the failure of reformist projects in the region in general. Noteworthy is that this is not the first time Islamist movements rise to the status of principal players in the region. In Iran, in 1979, the Mullahs reached power; in Algeria, the Islamist movement has a broad popular base and it fought the civil war in the 1980s; and in Iraq, the war that broke out following the U.S. invasion in 2003 was an essential factor for that led to the coming into power of Islamists, and the emergence of al-Qaeda in Iraq. What is your view on this issue, on the rise of these Islamist movements these days?

The surge of Islamist and Jihadist movement is true, and there is no doubt about it. In the writings of 2011, an optimistic trend could be perceived that was dominated by the expectation of a convergence of the popular movements that emerged in more than one Arab country. But also, when looking back at this period, it becomes evident that this optimistic view turned pessimistic, and one sees a stark shift from excessive optimism to an equally excessive pessimism. Those who came forth with generalizations regarded that the influence of Islamist movements – if it would not be moderate – would at least be contained through political processes within the Arab Spring. Following this first wave of optimism in 2011, a second wave of optimism could be observed during the flare-up of local confrontations between Islamists and non-Islamists, specifically in the context of the movement in Egypt. During 2011, optimism generated, from within itself, and to a big extent, an ambition for establishing a role model, by likening the Egyptian revolution with the French revolution. In other words, the Egyptian revolution was viewed as an event of founding quality for the region, in the sense that what was before the revolution differs from what came after it. This event, so it was perceived, would not only impact the fate of Egypt alone but of all Arabs collectively in the twenty first century.

This optimism found its continuation in 2012, albeit within a different framework. Then, the assumption on which this optimism was based was that there would be a democratic turn to the course of the events, including a democratic transfer of power. This optimism started to take effect, because it was through elections that the Islamists gained the majority of seats in all the elections that took place in 2012 in Egypt and in Tunisia. In Egypt, they secured for themselves the post of the president.

In 2013, optimism flared up again. But this time it was the result of confrontations in the form of the popular uprising against Morsi and the military coup against him. The optimists of this period had placed their bets on that Mohamed Morsi would be toppled, even if this required military interference. They regarded that these developments could potentially bring about a positive shift, and they expressed this

expectation in an exaggerated optimistic way, claiming that the end of political Islam had come. Today, we see that political Islam has not ended, even though its followers are unable to overcome the tragic experience of their rule in Egypt in that year.

The explosiveness and the difficulty of this matter arise from the fact that more than one Arabic society exists and that hence different contexts need to be considered. Islamist movements exist throughout the Arab world, and this reality poses a challenge to maintaining an overview. Every time I think about it, I find that this Arab Spring resembles the events that took place in a number of Arab countries in the 1980s. I will give you an example on the course of events in each one of the countries I have in mind. The Numeiri regime of Sudan fell in 1986. It was replaced by a military rule that peacefully transferred the power to the Sudanese people. In the following elections, the government of al-Sadeq al-Mahdi came into power. This experience of a democratic transfer of power could not be upheld for long, because the cooperation between the military and the Muslim Brothers created a dualism that led to the failure of the Sudanese Spring in the 1980s. The result of this cooperation manifested itself in a political wedlock between the Muslim Brothers under the leadership of Hassan al-Turabi and the military of Omar Hassan al-Bashir. During the same period, Tunisia had already been under the prolonged rule of long-time president Habib Bourguiba and his widow Assileh. There was a problem between the state apparatus and the ruling authority that caused the overthrow of Bourguiba. With the coup against the ruling class a popular multi-facetted movement emerged, including the union movement and uprisings in general. Here, a second model becomes visible: Through these events, the security regime was able to reinvent itself in a worse form, making the targeting of the Islamists one of its core functions. Previously, the conflict had targeted leftists and university students, especially during the Bourguiba era, but it now became focused on the Islamist movement. Hence, the Tunisian security apparatus underwent a restructuring process that was not only based on its struggle against the Islamist movement but it presented the importance of this struggle as being tantamount to the legitimacy of its rule. There are also the events of 1988 in Algeria, and the end of its one party rule. Elections took place, but the process ended with the military nullifying the elections and waging a war against the Muslim Brothers and the Islamic Salvation Front (ISF), thereby driving Algeria into a civil war. These revolutions did not receive the classification of an “Arab Spring”, because they did not possess the same communication means and media tools, and more so because they were not revolving around Egypt that was the center of the Arab world in the 1980s. In conclusion, three different models characterize the events of the 1980s. One is the Sudanese model in which the Islamists and the military together brought the democratic process to fall. The second is the Tunisian model with the return of the security regime, following a modest wave of protests in the Tunisian streets during Bourguiba’s reign and after – the rudiment of this model was the deterrence of Islamists. The third is the Algerian model in which elections took place but its results were nullified, resulting in the tragic Algerian civil war.

More than one aspect shows the similarity between today and the 1980s. Yet, one should not forget that the course today is an entirely different one because the context has also completely changed. Without doubt, two main poles exist until today in many countries: The military, and the Islamists. However, this does not mean that this [polarization] shall be regarded as the sole, fundamental equation that defines the respective situation and to neglect, at the same time, the social and local

structures of the regions. But, of course, the dualism of the military and the Islamists is, beyond doubt, the most dominant aspect in analyses. This holds especially true for the case of Egypt, but it may not be the corner stone for discussions on the situation in other countries. There are also two sides to the same coin, or two perspectives, when viewing Islamist movements. In the case of Iraq, for example, the U.S.-British occupation handed over the power to the Islamists. The Da'wah Party and the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq came into power after Saddam was toppled through a mixture of occupation and elections that were organized within an equation that was dictated by the occupying forces.

In the countries of the 2011 upheavals, Islamists had the biggest power to impose themselves in the course of the events. This is natural; there were many earlier processes that ensured their rise. In Egypt, for example, one sees that the transitional phase, which followed the fall of the regime, focused on the election of a constituent assembly. The Islamists had always been possessed by the idea of participating in the elections of such a general assembly that would be assigned the task of drafting a new constitution after the toppling of the regime. The transitional process in Egypt, specifically, was characterized by a partnership between the military and the Islamists. But their honeymoon phase came to an end around the time of the coup against Mohammed Morsi. The latter, Morsi, had placed his bets on forming a group of officers from among the military – after the fall of 'Anan and al-Tanatwi – that would at the least be close to the orientation and religious dogmatism of the Muslim Brotherhood. This group should include Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. To the Muslim Brothers, the "profile" of al-Sisi is the ideal profile, the one they wish to see in the army. The dramatic turn in events for the Egyptian Islamists was that it was exactly this "profile" (personified by al-Sisi), the one they had most desired, that turned out to have the greatest capability of ousting them. Today, the problem the Islamist movement faces is that it has fallen midway; it cannot move forward to achieve the model preached by Erdogan, nor can it stay where it is. During the times the followers of the Islamist movement were in prison, they truly aspired for the rule of Shari'a and the establishment of an Islamic state. Now, they have reached a point somewhere in the middle in which there is a civil state with Islamic referential authority. To the Islamist movement, this situation constitutes a considerable problem.

In 2012, when the Syrian revolution began, I was optimistic about the fall of the Syrian regime. According to my knowledge, the Muslim Brothers of Syria were strong and possessed moderate means through which they could mobilize their force. In Egypt and Syria, specifically, the Islamist movement has a much broader popular base than it deserves. This contrasts the prevalent image that the Islamists' mode of thought is regressive; they are organized in a modern way, proving wrong those who believe that Islamist organizations are challenged when it comes to deploying their resources through their organizational channels. These organizations have masses of people at their disposal, so big in number that it exceeds their need for marketing themselves. Yet, instead, these organizations busy themselves with their status as the oppressed, establishing the narrative of them being the victims of injustice, rather than being concerned with coming into power. It is true that these organizations yearn for power, but they do not have the means that are necessary for forming a governance system. In Egypt, for example, following the presidential elections, Morsi was degraded from being the president of a state to the head of an apparatus. Obviously, he does not own the state or the apparatus, and he simply tried to

manage the course of events in a way that would permit him [the Muslim Brotherhood] to set foot and spread into the public institutions. He did not want any problems with these institutions, but he quickly clashed with the Egyptian judiciary, Egyptian state bureaucracy, and with the al-Azhar [University]. The problem of the Islamists is that they have "lost" a comprehensive vision for seizing the state.

When you say, "the problem of the Islamists is that they have 'lost' a comprehensive vision for seizing the state," are you referring to Islamists in the general sense of the word, or to Islamists in the sense of movements of political Islam that pursue Islamic management style of state affairs in order to access power? Where do you place Iran and Turkey in this equation?

Some of the political movements with an Islamist orientation, in some places, were able to co-exist with the powers that be, or even reach power. But Arab Islamist movements do face the problem of how to come into power – except for Morocco where the government is led by the Muslim Brothers. If one looks at Iran and Turkey, no differentiation between the Iranian society and state, or the Turkish society and state, should be made. Also a distinction needs to be made between these two countries on the one hand, and the Arab countries and Pakistan on the other. The Islamist movement in both Iran and Turkey succeeded in [creating] the dualism of being nationalistic and Islamic at the same time. It is true that the Islamic Revolution in Iran followed a supranational ideology, but through its nationalist rationalism – especially during the Iran-Iraq war – it was able to reconcile with the notion of Iranian nationalism. This made it possible for the Islamic Revolution to become an Islamist movement in addition to it upholding nationalist ideas; it took on a form that was compatible with both concepts –the structure of Iranian Shi'ism, especially, imparts a nationalist character to religion.

The matter is more difficult in Turkey because the nationalist movement is in constant confrontation with the Islamist movement. The latter embarked on a course that connected it to Turkish nationalism (the Turkish nation and the Turkish nation-state), and it attempts to express the interests of the Turkish nation.

In Pakistan and the Arab World Islamist movements did not reconcile with any nationalist concept. This applies also to Egypt where the Islamist movement was not able to embrace Egyptian nationalism. Through the toppling of Morsi on the hands of the army and the Egyptian society at large the Muslim Brothers were ousted as a "foreign" actor; this was the continuation of a process that began in 1982, in the course of which the Muslim Brothers became alienated from the Egyptian society. It was unimaginable in Iran and Turkey to view such a process as beneficial to Islamists. None of the reasonable Turkish nationalists would say that Turkish Islamists constitute an alien entity, and the same holds true for Iran. But in Egypt, and now also in Tunisia, such a process is occurring. Why is that? It is because these Islamist movements embody a problem that is inherent to all Arab societies, namely the development of only a fragile nationalist sense and the failure in taking decisive decisions on matters of existential importance. The Arab Islamist movements are dissatisfied with the political entities in which they exist, yet they are unable to exit them. The same is the case in Pakistan, although its creation as a state was based on the idea of making Islam enclose a nationalist concept –in the style of India, even if only implicitly – as opposed to it being merely the state's religion. Therefore, attempts were made to root religion within an ideology that would yield that the Islam of India, or of Pakistan, is both a

nationalist as well as a national-religious faith. But the Islamist movement in Pakistan was incapable of transforming itself to fit within the nationalist matrix. In such countries, where national structures face the problem of making the nationalist notion congruent with Islamism, it is difficult for Islamists to position themselves as a national alternative that is capable of repeating the achievements of the Islamists in Turkey or Iran, specifically as the latter two seriously considered adopting the constitution. The Islamist movement in Turkey played a role in transforming Turkey into a constitutional state. Khomeini in Iran did not establish an Islamist emirate or kingdom, but rather he created a mixture of theocracy and constitutional rule. In contrast, the Islamist movements in the Arab world, with the exception of the al-Nahda movement in Tunisia, continue to see the constitutions as fabrications that could, at the very best, be adopted pro forma. The Islamist nationalist movements in Iran and Turkey were genuinely concerned with how to make Shari'a and the constitution compatible. The Arab Islamist movements are interested only in having a constitution that affirms Shari'a, and they do not have a comprehensive theory on governance. Khomeini, on the other side, and despite of everything else, established a general theory on state in which the sources of its legitimacy are determined. He identified two sources: the top-down source (Allah), and the bottom-up source (the people). These two sources intersect in the divine source, which is the Twelver school of thought (up to the twelfth Imam), and in the popular source, which is delimited by the constitutional system; the Supreme Leader (al-Murshid al-Aa'la) functions as the link between these two sources of legitimacy.

In Turkey there was no inclination towards theocracy in the first place. Islamists in Turkey had a self-perception similar to that of the conservative Christian parties of Europe, but impregnated with Ottoman nostalgia, and with a history of being an Islamist nuisance to the Turkish republicans. Here a mistake is often committed when the Islamist Turkish movement is regarded as a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. This is an amusing thought, because Turkish Islamists hold a self image in which they perceive themselves as a continuation of the reformist organizations and movement of the Ottoman Empire of the nineteenth century, and carriers of the Ottoman constitution of 1867, as well as part of the currents that participated in Kamal Atatürk's revolution and the Turkish war of independence. The difference is that the movement holds a distinct opinion with regard to the separation of religion from the state and the Islamic character of the state.

When speaking of any of the Islamist movements in the countries of the Arab Spring, regardless of the type of movement, be it Jihadists or Muslim Brothers, the influence of three systems has to be taken into consideration: Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. While Saudi Arabia is considered an Islamic system, there is reluctance in categorizing it: Is it – in the ideological meaning of the word – Islamic, or not? This constitutes the real difficulty in the research done on Islamist movements. Islamist movements cannot be understood through determining how they differ from conservative regimes, such as Saudi Arabia. And they cannot be understood as an absolute idea based on which differentiations among them could be drawn, as is done with socialist movements. If one is to speak of an Islamist ideology, then, as a matter of principle, the patterns of religious belief need to be discussed before the issue of ideology can be addressed.

This means that at a certain point one needs to think of Islamists in connection with how they perceive themselves, as they absolutely separate ideology from the spiritual state of being religious. Hence, there

are three systems on which all Islamist movements are based, regardless of the movement's political stance toward the Iranians, Saudis, or Turks. I believe that none of the Islamist movements – whether be it the Muslim Brothers or any other movement, including the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS, now IS) – pursues a utopian vision of a state or a society that differs from what already exists in Turkey, Iran, or Saudi Arabia. If one takes the model of IS as an example, one finds resemblance with the way society is perceived in Saudi Arabia, but added to that is a theocratic notion on the Caliphate that is influenced by the Iranian model. These three systems pose the limits for any vision that exists within Islamist movements. The al-Nahda movement in Tunisia, to give another example, is interested in the Turkish and Iranian models that had both embraced the movement and al-Ghannouchi during the time of his exile. It is also interested in the Turkish model for its boldness in practicing criticism of Islamic matters. These are the models Islamist movements refer to.

The above layout even applies to Jihadism. Assuming that IS in its schools makes use of text books of the Saudi curriculum, they still seek to produce an educational model that suits them, and hence that model must be affected by the neo-theocratic Iranian system but translated to fit their Sunni perspective. There is a fourth model which is the Afghan model that is being implemented on the ground: The Taliban. However, IS does not echo this model much because Taliban is, originally, neither a Salafist, nor a Wahhabi movement, but a movement that is based on the Hanafi doctrine and, in parts, it follows Naqshbandi or Jasidih Sufism. While Taliban-style violence may appeal to IS, they make use of it within the context of their own jurisprudence, their own view on society, education, women, economy, and even the management of oil revenues and its distribution – again, IS makes use of already existing models that suit it.

The Islamist movements that exist throughout the Indian subcontinent and Afghanistan, and the Islamist movements in the Arab world are influenced by a revival and Salafist movement of the Indian subcontinent that is probably older than the Wahhabi movement – hence the influence goes beyond the Afghan model. This revival movement first emerged on the hands of Ahmad al-Sirhindi and Shah Walli Allah al-Dahouli from within Sufism and its mystical paths. It then turned Salafist, destroying the domes of mosques in the Indian subcontinent. This movement revitalized the interest in achieving a unified stance against polytheism; this, so it was perceived, necessitated a struggle among Muslims themselves, and between Muslims and the non-Muslim majority population of the subcontinent. The movement's inability to absorb the collapse of the Islamic rule of the Muslim minority led to the events of 1919. I believe that this point is worth highlighting, because there is a common aspect here, that was experienced in a similar way by the movements in the Arab world and the movements of the Indian subcontinent, and that led to these movements' surge or emergence – even if this common aspect is placed in two different contexts and in two distinct, yet very closely related points in time. This common aspect is that of the Islamic caliphate. In 1919, when the British, French, and Greek entered Istanbul, Sultan Mehmed VI Vahiddedin signed an armistice. The entry of the World War I allies into Dar al-Khilafah (the seat of the caliphate) ignited the so called Khilafat movement in the Indian subcontinent during the period 1919-1932. The Khilafat movement was a movement of massive disobedience against the British rule in various parts of India, and mobilized fighters and volunteers to join the Turkish independence movement in Anatolia. The rise of this movement played a role in the establishment of an

Islamic fighter image that also led to the creation of modern Pakistan. However, when Pakistan was established, dispute arose as to whether it shall be an Islamic state or a state for Muslims. Some tried to align themselves with the approach of Kemal Atatürk, and sought to shape Pakistan as an Islamic state in the Atatürk fashion. Others where indecisive, for Pakistan was not a 100% Islamic, and it could not be turned entirely Islamic. Yet another group regarded that Pakistan would not receive any legitimacy unless it were Islamic. This context is close to that of the Islamist movement in the Arab world. The latter emerged during the time of conflict when Atatürk was fighting against the Armistice of Mudros, and when he travelled against the abidance of the caliph. To be more precise, at that time, the Arab Muslim street still supported Atatürk, and it stood up for the continuation of the caliphate and for expelling the British, French, and Greek from the seat of the caliphate in Istanbul. When Atatürk dissolved the caliphate in 1924, the Islamist movement emerged. Henceforth, the Islamist movement in the Arab world saw its existence justified, as was explicated by Ali Abdelrazzaq in his work "Islam and the principles of governance". One Islamist group was of the view that the abolition of the caliphate cannot be accepted, even if the Ottoman caliphate had been bad and corrupt, and even if all previous caliphates had not been much better either. This group propagated the preparation for the establishment of the true caliphate that would follow the example of the "rightly guided" caliphs. This is clarified in Mohammad Rashid Rida's book on the caliphate and the imam, which appeared during that period; his work rose to the status of "manifesto" for the Islamist movement.

Not even three to four years had passed after the abolition of the caliphate when a heated dispute on the issue of the caliphate arose in 1928. The Muslim Brotherhood was established in Egypt based on the conception that the abolition of the caliphate constitutes a catastrophe for the Islamic nation. However, the Muslim Brotherhood also saw in this catastrophe an opportunity for re-establishing a true caliphate. This stance was based on their view that the previous caliphate had only existed as a formality, and that it had been unable to protect itself. From now on, a gradual process would be stimulated to ensure that the conditions necessary for the emergence of a new caliphate are in place, and to re-Islamize Muslims. The Khilafat movement in India during the period 1919-1932, and the debate on the abolition of the caliphate that took place in Egypt and the other Arab countries after 1924, up to the events of 1928, played into the establishment of the Muslim Brotherhood. Not a single comparative analysis has been done on this topic, although carrying out such a comparison would reveal solutions to a number of issues, specifically because they [the Islamist movement in the Arab world and the Islamist movement in Pakistan] are the remainders of two branches that mutually affected each other's body of thought, and that continue to benefit from each other until today.

After a short period of time, in the 1940s, Abu'l-A'la Mawdudi claimed that since Pakistan had gained its independence and had become a state, it should not only be a country for Muslims but it should be an Islamic state that is free from infidels. This way, Pakistan would be an Islamic state and not a state for Muslims. This was the point of departure for the thoughts of Sayyid Qutb, which revolved around the idea of the divine rule. If the powers were to be divided according to Montesquieu, and the European liberal way – legislative, judicial, and executive functions – then, according to al-Mawdudi, the executive would be human, the legislative divine, and the judicial human, but all would be under the divine control. Hence, al-Mawdudi had taken the western model for the division of powers as is, but he had

situated the legislative function within the realm of the divine. This theory on governance was followed, and a few years later, in the 1950s and 1960s, Sayyid Qutb revitalized it in Egypt, albeit within a different view that does not abide by al-Mawdudi's division that was influenced, as said, by the liberal western tradition.

So, there was always a dynamic of low and high tide between the Islamist movements of India and the Arab world – the latter never rising to being a role model. There is a difference in the profiles of al-Mawdudi and Sayyid Qutb. The former perceived that Pakistan must be an Islamic state, not only a state for Muslims, and to him a war for the purpose of a establishing a new partition within Islam never took place. According to him, India is the "abode of war" (dar al-harb) to Muslims, while Pakistan cannot be the "abode of peace" (dar al-salam) as long as it is an "abode of hybrids"; hence, a lengthy struggle is supposed to be carried out, one where patience is required, so as to re-Islamize Pakistan and transform it into an Islamic state. That is why al-Mawdudi was not always part of the opposition. In the era of Zia-ul-Haq, al Mawdudi returned to Pakistan and became a partner in the government. The Islamist movement in Pakistan always nurtures violence, yet, at the same time, it participates in the government.

This geographic extension of Islamist movements from West Africa to East Asia brings back the conflicting, global debate on the impossibility of Islam entering the realm of western civilization, especially with regards to issues related to the adoption of democracy in its western sense, or human rights and freedoms, and the freedom of women. This means that the problematic question is whether Islam is capable of becoming part of western civilization, or not?

If one looks at the geographic aspect of these movements following 9/11, one finds that al-Qaeda and its offshoots, including IS and others, have an established experience in governance and in dominating peoples in many regions: Jihadist movements have dominated in Afghanistan, and in Yemen, for example; Haraket al-Shabaab al-Mujahidin in Somalia; again, al-Qaeda in the Arab Maghreb; and IS in Mali and Chad. During the past ten years, millions of Muslims lived under Islamic emirates. These emirates are not anymore a mere network of cadres that function to accomplish publicity and actions on the ground, but rather they constitute lived experiences in the area of running and managing people and resources in vast territories. An exception is the stable situation of IS in Iraq and Syria. How is this supposed to end quickly? All these experiences were controlled. To end them, a lever had to be put in place in each one of these regions. To take Somalia as an example of the simplest model: Ethiopia, the historical enemy of Somalia, entered Somalia, to drive off Haraket al-Shabaab and eliminate this Jihadist group's emirate. Another example is the attempt of the African Standby Forces, led by France, to expel Boko Haram from northern Nigeria. In addition to this type of model, there are also those movements that are an expression of the problems that entities face because of certain demarcations of borders (colonialist) that apparently did not exist originally. Here, a big problem surfaces with regard to the structure of these entities, and hence a movement such as al-Qaeda in the Arab Maghreb is capable of establishing an emirate that expands over the territory of more than one country at the same time; al-Qaeda was also capable of doing the same in at least two other countries, namely in Syria and Iraq. That Jihadist movements succeed in reaching the borders of Waziristan through the areas of the Pashtun in Afghanistan – where the borders were fictitious – demonstrates that such movements are capable of

addressing the problem of disputed borders, i.e., overcoming the problematic related to these borders between these entities. At the same time, these movements have ethnic specificities. Taliban is not like IS. The rhetoric of the Taliban strikes a pan-nationalist tone, even though it includes Pashtun, Uzbek, and other ethnic groups. In contrast, while IS counts a big number of fighters who come from far-away regions, it has a salient ethnic characteristic, which is that of the "Sunni Arabs", who appeared on the scene after the fall of Saddam. Hence, "Sunni Arabs" is a "minority group" that rejects the status quo after the toppling of the Saddam regime. Opposed to them stands a majority group that aspires to establish a majority Shi'ite rule. As a result, the conflict that emerged is a mixture of two specificities that drive the dynamic at the same time: ethnic, and school of Islamic jurisprudence (Madhab).

An internal contradiction can be observed among Arabs. One of this contradiction's expressions is the Arab-Turkish controversy that became apparent on the issue of Kobani, for example. Another expression exists implicitly in the Iraqi educational curriculum of the 1920s that transmitted the notion of Iraq being characterized by a continuous state of conflict between Arabism and people-based regionalism. So the conflict, according to that notion, exists between eastern Iraq and Iran – not Iraq and Iran – and between pure Arabism and an Arabism that is mixed with such people-based regionalism. This controversial notion was an issue. A practical expression of this controversy was seen in the stance Sati' al-Husari[1] took in his work a stance against Abu Hanifah al-Nu'man, one of the founders of the four canonical schools of Islamic law, because the latter was of Persian descent. In another incident, along the same line of controversy, the books of Ibn Khaldoun were burnt in Iraq because they were considered to describe the Bedouin in a hideous way, contrary to how the Bedouins would like to be described. At the same time, the dimensions of ethnicity and the different schools of Islamic jurisprudence also play a role. Their prevalence explains to a certain extent why IS has not expanded south even though it had proclaimed the idea of entering Baghdad earlier on. But IS entered Kurdistan, where a similar school of Islamic jurisprudence is followed.

When you describe these hybrid societies in Iraq, for example, then we could conclude that IS, to a large part, has no problem that relates to ethnicity because IS itself is not purely Arab.

There are two contradicting sides to IS: the Sunni Islamist, and the pan-Arab ethnic part, or "Sunni Arabs". The thought of "Sunni Arabs" being an ethnicity also bears an inherent contradiction; there is the ethnic influence on the one side, and the influence of the religious confession or school of Islamic jurisprudence on the other side. "Sunni Arabs" emerged as a new ethnicity, one that was artificially formed after the fall of the Iraqi regime and the endurance of the Syrian regime. A few years into the revolution, a dimension developed that presumably enclosed similarities between the Sunni Arabs of Iraq and Syria. As a result a new "people" came into existence which we call, without paying much attention, "Sunni Arabs", regardless of whether this is applied to Iraq or Syria. Here, a problem arises with the Kurds, because the denomination of "Sunni Arabs" is not more than ten years old. The problem revolves around the people who inhabit the two banks of the Euphrates and who live under the rule of IS. Irrespective of the existence of international fighters within IS, there is an ethnic side that provokes

[1] Sati'al-Husari was an Ottoman and Syrian writer and an influential Arab nationalist thinker in the twentieth century. He lived in Iraq, among other countries too. [Editor's note]

reactions among Arabs on the issue of Kobani and who viewed that it [the battle of Kobani] has taken place prematurely. The ball was then in the court of the Kurds, who are against IS, and who have resorted to their ethnicity as an influencing factor. This is not because the Kurds form part of IS, but because it is the other way around. IS is the first Islamist movement of Sunni Arab character in Iraq, and it was able to establish a foothold among the Kurds. This is not withstanding that there is an ethnic factor that could lead to congruous relations, as is seen in the relation between the Bedouins and IS, for example. But this relation is double-edged. IS fears the Bedouin tribal structure, and that it could be overthrown by it, just as the 2008-2009 events in al-Anbar proved when the tribes had provided a secure base for Jihadists but then turned against them. During that time, there had been an opportunity to induce a shift to the transitional process in Iraq, but the Bedouins could not tolerate the Jihadists any longer. Further, the Jihadists failed to dissolve the Bedouin structure. This was to the Jihadists an experience that differed from the one they had in Deir al-Zor, al-Hasakah, and Mosul.

I would like to turn once again to the issue of Western civilization as a model that stands in stark contrast to the Islamist Jihadist model in the name of which murder is committed, and that does not abide by the international human rights instruments. There seems to be a problem with Islam entering the realm of modernity.

In my opinion, as soon as we entered the era of modernism, all modern people, regardless of them accepting modernism or not, value the era of Western Enlightenment and judge non-Westerner's take on it. Of course, Islamists have a big issue with the values of that era, but they are not the only ones. Concerning modernization, the paradox here is that the only civilization in which the issue of scientific, technological advancements did not cause serious problems is that of the Islamic regions. If we look at the nineteenth century, we find that Japan, Russia, China, and India led serious debates among all its elites on their need, or not, for modernization – even though some sides, such as the Muslims, who rejected modernization. But at the level of Arabs, the matter is different, because none of the Islamist movements and elites rejects modernization in absolute terms; there is no rejection from IS, King Abdullah, or anyone else.

Do you mean to say that these movements and elites did not even once constitute a true fundamentalist (usuli) movement?

Yes, not a single time. In nineteenth century Russia, for example, industrialization was regarded the ne plus ultra, while modernization was seen as a Western product that had to be fought. In other societies, conflicting stances emerged between those who stood against technology and modernization, and those who had already engaged in it. In Japan and China this was exactly what happened. In the Islamic world this only took place partially, or some technologies were selected but not others. Printing, for example, led to a problem and there was a delay in its adoption. In the Arab Peninsula there was an issue for some time with the telegraph. But the bottom line is that there was not once a serious, fundamental problem with regard to accepting modernization. In contrast, there is certainly a serious, fundamental issue with regard to Western Enlightenment among Islamist movements, such as the unavoidable issue of equality between men and women. Human rights groups believe that there is an exit out of this situation for Islamist movements, especially in the matters related to human rights. But the most

prominent contrary remains between women and Islamists – this issue cannot be kept out of sight and mind, and it cannot be belittled.

Islamists regarded this issue as something that would sort itself out. Islam cannot relinquish the system of slavery. Islamists thought that slavery can be abolished in the US and in the Western European colonies. Until today, some areas within the Islamic territories still suffer from the continuation of slavery, albeit it has diminished into marginality. Therefore, one cannot claim that Islamic societies are based on this system of slavery anymore. But in the nineteenth century it was said that an organic relation exists between Islam and slavery. Slavery is still discussed today the same way it was in the nineteenth century. An example would be the Sultanate of Oman where slavery continued until the 1960s, because the colony of Zanzibar was the seat of the Sultan of Oman. It took a long time until the issue of slavery was finally solved there. This matter comes as one of the nuances of the idea of Enlightenment; another relevant idea from that era is the equality between men and women, which is a mental construct that the Islamist movement cannot accept.

Does this mean that your perception of the root causes of this problem confirms that it needed a long time to be solved, but that even though slavery still existed in the 1960s it shall be regarded as vanished, despite the fact that it still exists, even if only marginally?

My perception of this matter is in connection with another idea. In my opinion, there is a problem with decolonization. The manner of how this process is carried out is reminiscent of the process of ablating cancer; decolonization is transformed to serve as a means to hurt other peoples who live in the same territory. In India, for example, decolonization meant to expel Britain from the country. But there are others who believed that bringing the real colonization to an end is tantamount to getting rid of the Muslims, because Muslims are perceived as colonizers in the eyes of the Hindu revivalist movement and the Hindu nationalist movement that have reclaimed power in India. In the view of Hindus, colonization doesn't only date back two hundred years, but it began one thousand years ago with the Islamic invasion of India. Consequently, decolonization has become to mean to do away with more than 500 million persons. Societies that had been subjects of colonies view women as a weak link, a fragile being that is unable to resist Western colonization and its consumption market. These societies conclude, therefore, that women are in need of protection – this is a common aspect among all revivalist movements within colonies.

There is a common phenomenon among societies that were colonized, and even among those who only faced the danger of becoming a colony, or where affected by colonization in their vicinity: Movements emerge that are based on the idea of colonization, or more specifically on how to end it, but they are connected to a completely different concept than that liberation movements would follow. The former conceive that if it is to achieve decolonization, in India for example, then it has to uproot it; to end colonization, Islam has to be expelled from the Indian subcontinent. Within the Islamist movement there is a gender-based stance toward the woman, considering her to be the weaker creature that needs to be protected. This stance serves as an entry point to exert control over the mind of a nation. Hence, in the Islamic culture a comprehensive view on the woman exists that goes beyond the issue of seduction and how to confine her to her home, but that takes into consideration all aspects that may

allow her to launch a counter culture (children-women). If one were to study this matter in depth, one could preach down on Islamists based on their reference texts and to confront them with other readings of these texts. As a matter of fact, the reference documents make it possible for anyone to interpret whatever one wishes. The problem is that this construct is tied to a specific authority that exercises power through the issue of decolonization, which includes the influence of Western modernity or aspects that contradict Islam – all of which exist in reality. But to Islamists, the protection of women from being turned into objects goes via imposing on her to wear the veil (hijab), which in turn is connected to the idea that the woman needs to be protected from colonization.

For some time now, views have been circulated by the press, research centers, and some intellectuals on Jihadism, presenting it as a phenomenon that is nourished by a wrongful understanding of the concept of Jihad in Islam, and that it is this understanding that has driven violence to the extent in which the human body becomes an instrument in conflict, i.e., suicide attacks. This in turn led to a state of nihilism.

Not only is Islamist Jihadism considered the product of dictatorships and the regimes but everything one reads about it abnegates its existence. What I mean is that analyses and interpretations of those Jihadists deny that they are tied to the present, as physical persons who are in the possession of their own minds that produce ideas that reassert their human existence. More clearly even, the Jihadist is presented as a "Zombie" who comes from an alien place, and hence there is no way of dealing with him except for killing him or sending him to Guantanamo. Where does this perception come from? What is your analysis of Jihadists, and your take on this view of them?

I will elaborate on two aspects of your question: The first relates to the concept of conflict, and the second deals with the conception of Islamists as opponents of humanity and human race that strips them of any human attributes. The argument that Jihadists are opponents of mankind is the justification for brutally suppressing them and for explaining their behaviour in a manner that resembles that of a biologist describing parasites or rats; that is how Jihadists are perceived. This is linked to a gap that occurred in the nineteenth century in natural sciences when parasites and the cosmos of insects became part of biological science. From then on, attempts were made to describe human societies through the same mechanisms applied to parasites in the realm of this science. This approach did not remain confined to the terminology used in the nineteenth century but it was carried on and used as a metaphor for human existence, considering that behavior of human societies is similar to that observed in the microcosm of biological science. If a suggestion would be made to cleanse or evaluate certain phenomena, then this would be done by persons who are of the view that other people must be eliminated, or who regard that some people are the forerunner of a cancerous spread within society. During Naziism, for example, Jews were likened to cancer, and this was not only a metaphor but it was connected to a certain view of that time on cancer and how it spreads in the body. Hence, these views not only used but were based on analogies from biology. They are still used and dominate the description of Islamist movements and their host environments, as if the description was that of cockroaches.

Without doubt there are "factories" that generate Islamists or work on their revival. There are religious institutes and prisons, and there is a coming and going between the two. The profile of an Islamist

fighter is that of one who has spent ten years of his life in religious institutes, ten years in prison, and ten years in arid mountain areas and deserts. Hence, there are several spheres from which the perception of the typical Jihadist is formed, the simplest form of it would be: prison – religious institute – mountain or wilderness. These are places that symbolize extreme greed, the formation of religion, space, and taking one's freedom.

On the contradictory issue of Jihad ... The importance of Jihad was renewed in modern times through revivalist movements that were of the view that Jihad is a duty that needs to take place between Muslims themselves in order to reinterpret Islamic monotheism – not only on the basis of reaching consensus on the oneness of God but on the unity in servitude to God; in other words, the Wahhabi idea. This resulted in a classification of Muslims, but also non-Muslims. Hence, Jihad is connected to a problem that revolves around the relation of Islam with Muslims; but the question of whether Islam is equal to the sum of all Muslims, or not, is not raised.

In Christianity, this question was debated during the Renaissance era in Italy. Is the church the sum of all Christians, or is the church something else? This question on the relation of Islam with Muslims is relatively new, and it has two sources: The first stems from within the Islamist movements, and the second from Western Orientalism. Islam was formed between the images of these two sources. The image that spread among the revivalist movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was that Muslims of those times had ceased to be Muslim enough, and that hence a gap between Muslims and Islam existed. This conception was used by reformists such as Muhammad 'Abduh[2], for example, who believed that Muslims lacked behind in catching up with civilization for reasons inherent to Islam. After the reformists, the liberals adopted the same view with regard to Muslims lacking behind civilization, but in their eyes the problem lay in Muslims, not in Islam. This is where the liberals and the Wahhabis meet in thought: both consider that the source of the problem is the Muslims, not Islam.

This division shows that two contrary essential views exist within Islam and among Muslims. Clarifying the relation between Islam and Muslims will lead to the problematic issue of the concept of Jihad, especially when looking into how and where Jihad has been deployed during the past two hundred years. When Bonaparte approached Muslims, he saw in Islam a potential energy that could be deployed to serve French colonial interests. His view was that he could inspire the Muslim peoples, from Egypt to India, to cut off the British. When in 1914 the Ottoman Empire entered World War I, it declared Jihad against its enemies in this war. But its allies were Germany and Austria – it was the first time that Jihad was declared within the framework of Muslims being allies with infidels. Hence, the concept of Jihad had been perverted to a large extent throughout the past two hundred years, irrespective of whether Jihad was practiced among Muslims who considered the other group non-Muslim, or whether it was invested in and deployed as a force by Europeans, or to spread the ideas of the Bolshevik revolution that took place in 1919 and export these to Bolshevik movements in central Asia – again, here Islam was seen as a force that could potentially serve interests. Hence, the idea of Islam as a source of power that could be

[2] Muhammad 'Abdu, (born 1849, Nile Delta area, Egypt—died July 11, 1905, near Alexandria), religious scholar, jurist, and liberal reformer, who led the late 19th-century movement in Egypt and other Muslim countries to revitalize Islāmic teachings and institutions in the modern world. See: http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/892/Muhammad-Abduh. [Editor's note]

used in a controlled way emerged, based on the knowledge that Jihad is Islam's source of power and that it could be directed according to wish, as long as it does not turn against the force that deploys it, because then Jihad would become one's own enemy. This idea existed throughout many generations, and it was implemented according to the different backgrounds and intentions of its users. However, this idea found its manifestation in Afghanistan. The US dominion makes use of this idea today, and it has financed Jihadist movements. In a country like Afghanistan, a backward monarchy ruled, and a group that was disconnected from Afghanistan's popular bases staged a coup with the intention of transforming the country into a popular democratic system. But this group was neither able to protect itself from adversary reactions from within the Afghan society, nor to unite its rows. Hence, the killing of communists in Afghanistan began which elicited Soviet interference and its invasion of the country in 1980. At that time, the Afghan people were subjected to Soviet invasion only because of the doings of the US, and all issues related to Jihad became connected to nationalist and ethnic contexts. Bourguiba, to give a different example, was called "the great Mujahid", because liberation and nationalist movements, specifically in the Arab Maghreb, maintained a positive notion of Jihad, and regarded that Bourguiba supported the nationalist liberation cause. Today, a connection is established between Jihad and Takfiri[3] movements. However, making this connection is not helpful in placing matters within their general framework. In recent history, over the past two hundred years, there were horrible uses of Jihad, in many distinct ways that contradict the concept of Jihad. A question that could be asked is whether there is an element of violence toward other religions that is inherent to Islam. From the perspective of other religions, this is the underlying question of interest.

According to Orientalism, research suggests that Islam has elements of violence... is Islam capable of abandoning its violence, or not?

There are two responses to this question. A first response would be that only some sixty years ago, Europe left two World Wars behind. One could also speak of the violence of colonialism. As to the issue of violence being inherent to Islam, I can give you examples of approaches that refute this. These approaches make clear, that the history of mankind is, without doubt, a history of wars, and that these wars have become more dreadful with the development of modern industries. They also show that Europeans have toned down their hostilities not because of their rationalism but because not enough were left to be killed and to fight the war. Europe's demography was exhausted after World Wars I and II. Until the nineteenth century, Europe witnessed a huge demographic growth compared to the demography of the Ottoman Empire that had stagnated during the previous three hundred years, and during which the number of Muslims did not grow. Even the growth of the Christians in the Orient exceeded that of Muslims. The Christian demographic boom was a factor that played into the conflict in Mount Lebanon between the growing number of Maronites and the Druze, who had also stagnated in growth and had remained a minority in Mount Lebanon over the previous two hundred years. In the region, in general, the number of Greeks also grew disproportionately more than that of Turks. Hence, the number of Christians grew in the Ottoman Empire, which was facing the problem of lack of fighters

[3] A "takfiri" is a Muslim who accuses another Muslim of apostasy. If the accusation stands, the alleged apostate is excommunicated from the Muslim community, denied protection under Shari'a law, and condemned to death. [Editor's note]

that could deter Russia. This was because of a demographic decline that occurred among Muslims. There was a general view that a problem Muslims had was their low birth rate that was not sufficient to bring about a demographic boom. Some even foresaw that Islam would vanish because Muslims were not able to solve their demographic problem. Today, we observe the complete opposite, and there is much talk about the fear of the growing number of Muslims, and how Muslims intend to solve this matter that is of concern to their surroundings. Hence one aspect to this issue is that the number of Muslims increases. Two criticisms were brought forward against Muslims in the nineteenth century. The first was that Islam is a fundamentalist religion, as was presented in Voltaire's play 'Mahomet'. The second criticism was that it is a fatalistic religion that yields to fate and destiny and does not embrace aspiration. In the nineteenth century, Gobineau, for example, regarded that the problem of Muslims is their loss of values related to freedom. In every era, the images that were created of Islam were connected to one of these two criticisms. Despite all this, there remains one insuperable aspect to Islam – when referring to transcriptions and studies of different religions – that is the use of violence and war during the early Islamic period, on the hands of the first Muslim generation. The creation of the [ancient] Hindu state cannot be accurately traced back to a specific time or place, and it may well be that this state's religion was based on myths, their true happening being unimportant, because these became embodied in their ancient deities. In contrast, Mohammad lived not so long ago, during the seventh century, the era of empires. Here, one encounters a paradox of a man who was prophet as well as a warrior and a merchant; this implies at the same time that the idea of a merchant becoming a prophet had developed. Another paradox is that in other religions an armed prophet – in such a way – does not exist. It is true that in Judaism armed prophets also existed, but the idea of the prophet being armed is of central value in Islam when compared to other religions. Surely, the idea of reviving the Islamic golden age bears potential for violence that does not exist in the same way in other religions. The Hindu revivalist movement is similarly violent in the fashion of having the warrior god. In the Hindu mythology with its deity Rama, the warrior god is symbolized by the sword and spear of Rama; these became the symbols of the violent movements of Hindu revivalism. Hence, the notion of violence exists in every religion, but tracing it in Islam is easier. Surely, Christianity also has violent aspects, and it also spread by the force of the sword. But, again, the possibility of tracing this, in combination with the centrality of the notion of violence in the view persons hold toward their religion is not as direct and essential as it is in Islam and in the relation of Muslims with their prophet and the Companions of the prophet, who together constituted the founding era of Islam – again, an era that was characterized by wars, invasions, and conquest.

In any case, violence is something ancillary to all human beings. In all religions one finds a stored potential of ideas that can readily be brought forward to justify the use of arms and war. Some of this stock of ideas became part of mythology, which is originally based on semi-deities, such as the like of Rama the warrior god who fought his enemies. But Rama remains within the realm of mythology and legends, even if this deity was transformed into a symbol by the Hindu revivalists. The Nazis also made use of Germanic symbols and legends to play specific roles. Muslims did the same. It may well be that the legends used represent real eras in history, but that then these events of these eras where molded into a mythical packaging fit to be deployed as needed. At some points in time, these legends had greater impact than at others. This was especially then the case when certain movements, by resorting

to these legends, succeed in showing or depicting how considerable similarities exist between Islam and the rest of the world today. Abd al-Wahhab[4], in the eighteenth century, developed his ideas in Hijaz under circumstances that were very similar to those of the Hijaz of Prophet Mohammad one-thousand one hundred years earlier. The prophet fought against the worship of idols, and Abd al-Wahhab fought against the worship of graves, setting this practice equal to the worship of idols. Because people diverted from the worship of Allah to the worship of domes and graves – as an expression of intercession with Allah – Abd al-Wahhab regarded that the [pre-Islamic] circumstances had re-emerged. Since then, until today, there is a perception that the era of today is similar to pre-Islamic time and the advent of Islam. Sayyid Qutb took another approach; he saw the similarity [between his time and the pre-Islamic era] in the existence of two major powers: the Soviet Union and the US, in analogy to the Persian and the Byzantine empires of the foregone time. When Islam came, it succeeded in crumbling one empire, and it extinguished the other. According to his [Qutb's] line of thought, Islam would terminate the Cold War. Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr[5] regarded that the Islamic economic system is the one that would solve the problems of the world.

Previously, you had written about the rejectionist axis, the regimes that are part of this axis with Iran. These regimes are dictatorships that cover behind their proclaimed animosity toward imperialism, and that never achieved more as states than the suppression of its people and maintaining a firm grip on societies. For some time now, you are writing against Arab liberals who uphold their view on modern states. Where, in your opinion, will the debate on this problematic issue among Arab intellectuals from both camps – pro rejectionist and their opponents – lead?

I understand how it feels to be against two issues at the same time. I was against the rejectionists and also against the liberals, not to forget the Islamists. It easy to be against nearly everything. But then, rejection becomes meaningless, and the whole idea becomes distorted. From what I perceive, liberals, rejectionist, and Islamists are not treated the same way; it is impossible to deal with all the actual political movements and ideas in the same manner. Regarding rejectionism, in my view, a rejectionist ideology does not exist.

Rejectionism is a specific idea. When I speak of it, then I refer to a clear concept. Yet, after the occupation of Iraq in 2003, the use of this concept spread as a form of theorization of a group that is led by two regimes, Iran and Syria, including all their proxy movements such as Hezbollah and Hamas, which act in support of the "honourable" Iraqi national resistance.

So, the West is living a crisis since its occupation of Iraq in 2003?

Yes, because the West wants control, but it is not willing to pay the price for having it, especially if the mode of payment is bloodshed. The West has entered a never-ending conflict with the "Takfiri" Jihadist

[4] Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb, (born 1703, ʿUyaynah, Arabia [now in Saudi Arabia]—died 1792, Ad-Dirʿīyah), theologian and founder of the Wahhābī movement, which attempted a return to the "true" principles of Islam. See: http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/634033/Muhammad-ibn-Abd-al-Wahhab. [Editor's note]

[5] Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, founder of the Islamic Daʿwah Party, who in 1980 was executed for his opposition to Ṣaddām Ḥussein. See: http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1008510/Muqtada-al-Sadr#ref988281. [Editor's note]

movements. At the same time, the rejectionist regimes are playing a dual game. On the one hand, these regimes are on the list of designated terrorist organizations, and the organizations they support are also classified among such lists of the U.S. and the West. On the other hand, these regimes also support the West in combating terrorism. The role Iran played, and the support it provided to the U.S. during its war in Afghanistan against Taliban, then Iraq, and Syria, is well known. Until today, rejectionist regimes adopt the idea of combating terrorism, and they expand the definition of this idea depending on how they intend to use it. For example, the regimes use this idea to suggest that terrorism is embodied in an entire society, or strata of it, or a sectarian group, or whole regions. When Balochistan, for example, is mentioned in Iran in the course of speaking of terrorism, then Iranians in Iran refer to predominantly Sunni Balochistan in its entirety and regard that fighting terrorism in Balochistan is equal to fighting Balochistan itself. When the Syrian regime speaks of fighting terrorism, its point of departure is the notion that it is an Alawite regime that faces a Sunni majority. While these regimes hold adverse stances to imperialism, they do maintain a controversial relation with the U.S. and participate alongside the West in combating terrorism, so as to benefit from this window that the West opens to them. Since terrorism does exist, this fight is necessary. These regimes are a deterrent to the expansion of terrorism, and, hence, they are indispensable to the West that wishes to minimize its own losses in the course of eradicating terrorism. This could be perceived from the rhetoric Bashar al-Assad used during the past four years while he is being cornered in his relation with the West through international isolation. Yet, at the same time, al-Assad managed to adopt the fight against terrorism. Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah endeavored in this fight using the same approach as the U.S. neoconservatives, and hence they appear absolutely in line with the FBI's rhetoric in the combat of terrorism. These are the dynamics through which rejectionist regimes function.

What constitutes the problem, in your opinion, of these groups that rule over very large territories, and what are relevant governance issues?

To answer this question, a differentiation has to be made between the regime in Syria and Iran. To me, the most important revolution, or the last revolution of the world, is the Iranian revolution. I say this because I see the cohesion of the Iranian society within one unity as one of the salient revolutionary moments of the twentieth century. However, when one speaks of the rejectionist axis (Iran and Syria), , two different societies, two very distinct political systems, and different perspectives in assigning weight to matters must be considered. Iran is the last comprehensive, popular revolutionary experiment that toppled a system. In Syria, the situation is different. The Syrian regime is a model of a system with a revolutionary overweight, and part of its revolutionary ideology does not relate to a popular revolutionary movement (I mean the Syrian Ba'ath). The problem in Syria is that the entire population had exaggeratedly bought into the idea of revolution – there is the Ba'ath Revolutionary Youth (shabibat al-Thawra) and the Revolution newspaper (jaridet al-Thawra) – and all that relates to the revolution forms part of the Ba'ath's body of thought. The current Syrian revolution only made matters worse, leaving the modern Syrian history without a real, comprehensive popular revolution, such as the Iranian revolution. The Iranian revolution cannot be reduced to the rejectionist "ideology". In order to understand post-revolution Iran, it has to be seen within the context of Islamic countries, from Malaysia to Iran, which face serious modernization and development challenges. We also shouldn't forget the

Asian context in which Iran is set; Iran's interests stretch from Korea to China. All of these countries are undergoing painful processes so as to become important global players. The world has also stopped being connected along the Atlantic equation: Western Europe, and North America – an equation of two giants. Asia is on the rise, and Iran is part of it. The problem cannot be seen by looking at Iran by itself. When Iran is regarded from the perspective of its relations with China and India, then Iran is seen within the context of the problems related to the rise of Asian societies. However, when Iran is viewed in connection with the Arabs, then the developmental aspects are ignored and forgotten, and instead the focus shifts to how Iran supports Bashar al-Assad and the movements that are part of the rejectionist axis – this is how Iran becomes part of the primarily sectarian-based conflict, which is the Sunni-Shi'ite struggle in the region.

Where is the Arab Left in all these ongoing events? Where do you see the class struggle in our region? Does the Left still exist as a theoretical class-oriented construct through which Arab regimes and societies can be analyzed? Or, are there other terms than "class", as we understand it in its pure and obvious meaning?

When speaking of class struggle, we first need to admit that talking about the Arab Left means to talk about elites – specifically in the Arab world. Second, in my opinion, the most important class sphere that is home to large masses in the Arab world is that of peasants and their rural areas of habitat. These played a role in two of the Arab Spring revolutions, specifically in Tunisia and Syria. The first spark of these revolutions was ignited in the rural area in Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia, and in the outskirts of Dar'a in Syria, and later in the rural areas surrounding Aleppo and Damascus. In contrast, the revolution in Egypt –the Arab country with the biggest concentration of peasants – did not start in rural areas, or at least not in such an obvious way as it did in Tunisia and Syria. This is not entirely accurate, because the Egyptian delta region, which is a living space of peasants, was part of the popular uprising, even though it did not participate as intensely as did the crowds in Tahrir Square in the centre of Cairo. This observation deserves further research.

The issue with the Left in the Arab World is that it always prioritizes cities and labourers, although neither constitutes such a significant force as the "Peasants". All Arab societies were originally based on shepherds, or on farmers working the land. The societies of Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, Algeria, and Morocco were agrarian societies. In general, The Arab Left has a problem of concentrating mainly on cities. Even if the Arab Left follows its rooted commitment to the proletariat, it still focuses on the small bourgeois in the city, and awaits the redeemer in the person of the ideal bourgeois. The conditions in Egypt, Syria, or Iraq cannot be compared by looking at these countries from the outside. I am affected by my travels to India and Nepal where the Left is tied to the idea of peasantry, which is the matter of interest to the majority of these two countries' populations, and where the majority live in rural areas. The main line of defence in the class struggle there runs between the peasants and the state, the peasants and the landowners.

This view of class struggle, i.e., peasantry as a class, is not entirely absent in our region. The peasants of Syria decided to disobey the regime that continuously tried to spread among them the idea of it being a regime for the peasants, while it imposed on them, at the same time, all elements of its minority

oriented, religious, sectarian, and authoritarian nature. In the regime's rhetoric the emphasis often is on the idea of how Alawite officers in the army of Hafez al-Assad are the sons of farmers. Such are the ideas that the regime disseminated among the entire society.

Yet, such ideas did not serve the regime in the Dar'a uprising. But because notions of a liberal ideology dominate all the Arab revolutions, revolutionaries prefer not to talk about bread but, instead, to address social issues and freedom in an abstract way. Hence, the driving force behind issues related to peasants has changed; this force transformed into a factor that pursues the disintegration of entities and that feeds into the emergence of Islamist movements, which mainly spread in the rural areas of Aleppo, Damascus, and Zahran Aloush. Paradoxically, these movements are void of any programs that relate to rural areas and peasants. The political movements of the Syrian revolution, or all the political ideological movements, are based on liberalism, and specifically on the idea that freedom exists in isolation from any sort of social content. This understanding of freedom was translated into practice, based on a comic view on the use of violence and the manner in which armed conflict is to be carried out. I am not against armed struggle in Syria, but I am against the core of the strategy that was followed [in the revolution] that mobilized the populations of rural areas to take over the cities. As a result of this strategy it seems today that the Syrian regime is omnipresent, in all parts of Syria, because of its routes of transport. The regime is not very far from al-Riqqa, and it controls the vicinity of al-Riqqa and Deir al-Zour. So, instead of [the revolutionaries] building popular authorities within the rural areas that work on cutting the regime of its routes of supply and transport, the regime's existence remains dependent on these routes of transport. As a matter of fact, these routes are the only card the regime still holds. And, again, instead of the major cities being a burden on the regime – which is supposed to guarantee for the cities' security and needs – through protest movements inside the cities, and through a popular peasants' movement from outside the cities that cuts off the supply line of the regime, revolutionaries are incapable of managing and financing their revolution, and they can't allow its inhabitants to leave. The revolutionaries are not capable of taking full control over any of the cities, except for the regions that have fallen under IS and that no longer are under the control of the regime. All other cities are in the hands of the regime, and the regime remains close. In my view, the confusion between Islamist ideology and liberal ideology, mixed with residuals of the Ba'ath, has destroyed the Syrian revolution and has taken the wind out of the sails of its revolutionary potential – the rural areas. In Tunisia, the situation is similar, to some extent. The revolution had started in the rural areas, but then this fact was forgotten, and the focus shifted to the cities. Yet, it is impossible that the political analysis and rhetoric remains concentrated on cities only, while the majority of the population lives in rural areas. Most of the Syrians live in the countryside. The same applies to Egypt, even if it is repeatedly highlighted that the population of Cairo has reached around 25 million, and Alexandria 10 million. The remainder of the population, the majority, lives in the villages of Egypt's delta and in Upper Egypt. The structure in Tunisia and Morocco is similar.

When speaking of the Left, or of any other movement that claims to bring back to the forefront social issues without having a vision for the issue of rural areas and its population, or for any issue that falls within the rural realm, I do not see any future for such movements. Regarding the Arab revolutions in specific, the Tunisian case showed how a leftist political party achieved relatively good results and how it

then came to face a crisis regarding its political orientation, because it supports Bashar al-Assad and its regime. There are political parties whose ideology is still entrenched with memories of the twentieth century – and not the best memories for that matter – as shows the fact that the most promising political party in the Arab Spring is, ideologically speaking, in accord with the regime of Bashar al-Assad and demands that the diplomatic relations with the Syrian regime be re-established. Some of the political parties of this new generation succeeded in establishing a name for themselves and in advancing as political players over the past few years. But many of these parties are still Euro-centred, and their body of thought is tied to the European Left. Hence, they try to import the leftist European experience to their country without change.