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Political Reform and the Reconfiguration of National Identity in Syria

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Is it necessary for a conversation about cultural or social diversity in Levantine or Arab societies to be tied to another conversation about the disintegration of these societies and the risk of allowing powerful western powers a firm foothold in the area? Is there not a way to strengthen the unity and cohesiveness of these societies without dropping a wall of silence over the realities of diversity, all in the name of “national unity”? Could we not develop an approach that brings together these realities without camouflaging, exaggerating or down-playing their importance? Could we not place this approach within the context of a national democratic policy that guarantees equality and equal rights to all the country’s citizens regardless of their origin and background?

Iraq’s current predicament is living proof that we need to transcend these ostrich-like policies as far as the social, cultural and religious make up of Arab societies are concerned. Syria cannot afford to be unconcerned by the ramifications of the long suppressed problems of diversity, especially given the intense and belligerent foreign presence in the region. Ever since the “oriental problem” surfaced, western presence in the region has traditionally been associated with the destabilisation of Levantine societies. Redefining the roots of Syrian national identity, as this paper argues, will end the risks of a possible resurgence of the oriental or the Greater Syria problems that operate under the old-new dilemma of “protecting minorities or spreading democracy.”

The paper proposes the reconfiguration of the Syrian national identity based on an all-encompassing principle that considers Arabism as part of being Syrian, and one of the cornerstones of the democratic Syrian national identity. It distinguishes however this vision from another exclusive one, which believes that one cannot be an Arab except if he ceases to be a Syrian, a Muslim or a Christian, a Sunni or a Shiite... and conversely, cannot be a Syrian except if he ceases to be an Arab or a Kurd, a Christian or a Muslim... Arabism is part of Syria and not the other way round, and Islam is part of Syria and not the other way round.

The first step on the road to democracy is to recognise one’s national reality, as it is, with its complexities and multiple dimensions intact. Above all, the Syrians’ very first democratic representation should be the factual representation of their realities on the ground, and the formulation of theories that make room for their country’s complex social realities.

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A widely read Syrian electronic website* would not have reprinted the article entitled “Syria’s Identity Crisis”, fifteen years after it was first published, if the subject did not interest a cross-section of the Syrian elite readership of the bulletin. The article, written by the neo-conservative American writer Robert Kaplan, predicts the dismemberment of Syria, like Yugoslavia, which was in the process of dismemberment at the time, in 1992, and sees Syria as a potential candidate for Balkanisation, the fate of many heirs of the Ottoman Empire.

I use deliberately the word “potential” as the desire to dismember Syria is hardly concealed in the author’s lines.

Nevertheless, the interest of certain sectors of the Syrian elite in issues of identity, and the social and cultural make-up of the country, hardly goes beyond low level and oblique discussions in articles by certain intellectuals, or pieces published on the internet. The Syrian website’s reprinting of Kaplan’s article in English, without translation into Arabic, gives us an idea about the level of debate around the issue of identity in Syria. It is a discussion from behind the veil, confined to a very narrow and elitist sector of the population, and the little of it that exists is characterised by either embarrassment and shyness, or impudence and recklessness. Intellectuals and political organisations are basically embarrassed to tackle frankly and openly a sensitive issue that lacks the proper theoretical or practical means of approach it. Sectarian and ethnic activists on the other hand, attack other religious, sectarian or ethnic groups as a means of reaffirming their own different religious, sectarian and ethnic identity. To these people, the internet provides and ample and fitting space, without any rules or constraints, to wreak partisan and sectarian havoc. It is high time however that we consciously acknowledge the dire need for balanced and accurate approaches that combine intellectual maturity and national commitment. Issues

of national identity are far too important to keep silent about or leave to the sectarian-minded.

It is quite usual for westerners close to decision-making circles in their own countries, to see Levantine and Arab societies in terms of ethnic and sectarian groups at each other’s throats, or according to the long-held Orientalist view of a social “mosaic”. They mostly believe that these cohabiting mosaic pieces are neither homogenous nor lend themselves to the establishment of proper nationhood. On the other hand, it is quite common for Arab nationalists and local patriots in the Arab world, to downplay the importance of these differences and deny their having any political significance. Thus, gradually, it became the accepted norm that a discussion about diversity within our society is part of western enemy theories and schemes, and that real patriotism resides in keeping these difference under wraps, if not denying their existence altogether. In this context, the Syrian case is somewhat unique. The “Syrian Arab Republic” is not the only country where Arabism is part of the official name, but its society is certainly more ethnically and religiously diverse than Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Yemen or Libya. At the same time, Syria seems the most vehement among the Arab countries about denying its diversity and identifying with Arabism, and the ruling party’s ideology is imbued with Arabism. It does not only assume that all Syrians are Arabs but makes out of this pure and faceless kind of Arabism their first and final object of loyalty. On the other hand, Syria has been a regional state for nine centuries, has been politically “stable” since 1970, and as an entity since 1967, (though it is a lame stability with Israel’s occupation of the Golan Heights since 40 years). It has forged interests, feelings and loyalties based on these facts. At the same time, its status as an independent state and a complex society lacks the proper knowledge, or a conceptual awareness of

*The bulletin is entitled “We are all Partners”, April 5/6, 2007.

itself, that can give it harmony and legitimacy. On the other hand, there exists a conceptual awareness of Syria's Arabism that no longer applies to the realities of today's state and society. Does this really guarantee "national unity" and ensure the homogeneity of the Syrian society and its unanimous support for Arab unity? Can Arabism today be the only and exclusive basis for the unity of will among 19 million Syrians?

Recent developments in Iraq following the American occupation, and before that the Lebanese civil war, which lasted one and a half decades, invite another approach to the issue of Syria's national identity. It seems that the repression imposed on ethnic, religious and sectarian realities in our country is not conducive to strengthening social integration. Rather, it can provide cover for the transformation of social differences into political divisions that threaten concerned countries with disintegration and civil war. These two examples clearly show that the above-mentioned repression provides outside interferences with the necessary domestic excuses. When certain local social and cultural elements feel alienated from the supposed national consensus, they seek outside relations and allies and thus provide them with a valid excuse to interfere.

I argue here is that issues of cultural diversity within Arab societies can be approached from a democratic and nationalistic standpoint. The argument simultaneously rejects the western, conservative, right-wing narrative of think tanks whose interest in diversity is confined to empowering American and western hegemony, and strengthening the centrality of Israel in the Middle East. It also rejects the traditional Arab national and popular narrative, which believes that the only way to ensure the cohesion of our societies is to conceal facts about diversity behind a thick wall of silence. We also all know that this theoretical silence did not prevent local

authorities who found it often necessary to play on glossed-over differences to boost their own power. Saddam Hussein's regime, which relied on its tribal, family and Arab credentials and, to a certain extent, on the Sunni Muslim milieu, was not the only one to do that. Similar comments are often heard about the Syrian regime. Here, the stark and bombastic nationalism, whose banner the two Baathist regimes have long raised aloft, has become nothing but a veil that conceals behind it narrow and divisive issues of identity. It seems obvious that the genesis of such practices is to be found in the two regimes' main priorities, at the top of which lies the desire to stay in power, hence the need to depend on a reliable social base, and to conceal this dependence, a rhetorical and symbolic tribute is paid to the homogenous nationalism.

Syrian Society

Syria is the main component of the "Levant", what we call in Arabic "Greater Syria", an area rich with diversity, that also incorporates within it a wide social variety. Not all Syrians are Arabs; there are Kurds, Assyrians, Armenians and Circassians among them... Likewise, not all Syrians are Muslim; there are Christians, Yazidis and a very small number of Jews. In the same vein, not all Muslims adhere to the same sect; there are at least five different sects: Sunnis, Alawites, Druze, Ismailis and Shiites, and not all those that belong to this or that sect are true believers. There are an unidentified number of non-believers, some of whom are opposed to the very idea of religion. On the other hand, not all believers are religiously observant; some are not at all, while others are so to various degrees. There are also the secularists who believe in the separation of state and religion.

Are all these people not Syrian citizens? No, unfortunately they are not. There are over a quarter of a million Kurds deprived

of their Syrian citizenship without any other recourse (for years now, the state has been promising to remedy the situation, but so far without tangible results). It remains a fact, however, that the Syrian identity is the only possible common denominator among all the above communities, and the only way to maintain good relations between them is to ensure their equality within the Syrian entity.

This socio-cultural setting is also in a state of flux; it is different today from what it was three or four decades ago, and very different both today and then, from what it was a century ago. For example, it is widely believed that Syrians are more religious today than when the Baath first came to power, and more attached to their respective religious, sectarian and ethnic communities. There is also the widespread, and probably accurate, belief that social diversity is more politically significant today than at any other time.

These simple and basic facts are alas often forgotten, and those in power behave as if they either do not exist or are insignificant. They are, however, enough for us to say that the Syrian national identity is a complex one, and does not lend itself to over-simplification. Being aware of facts is essential, above all in order to guarantee an accurate and genuine representation of Syrian society as it actually is, albeit before political or social factors are formulated to suit them. Representation of realities and political options are inseparable. Giving Syria an Islamic identity, or considering Islam the core of this identity, is neither a socially nor a politically neutral act. It means bestowing upon Islamists a preferential position in delineating the country's political system, its basic cultural choices and the shape of its interaction with the rest of the world. It is in any case, the basis for the Islamists' intellectual vision of the country. The same applies to Syria's acquired Arab identity, which for nearly five decades has formed the intellectual

background of official policies. If we are interested today in the facts about the social diversity of our societies, it is because the policies that have been formulated to suppress it have sacrificed democracy without promoting national cohesion. At the risk of stating the obvious, one should stress that cultural diversity does not constitute a problem by itself and that problems arise when the political context and official social representations do not correspond to realities on the ground.

Any valid representation of Syrian identity has to be by definition complex and constantly evolving, and has to open the door to a wider participation by Syrians anxious to remake their country's image and delineate its role in the world. This notion should be the main defence against those who say that Syria is an illegitimate "artificial entity" with the aim of either incorporating it within a wider Arab entity, or dismantling it into "natural" religious, sectarian and ethnic entities, as Robert Kaplan proposes. As I argue below, defining the Syrian entity through the rhetorical position that pretends to transcend it without any genuine dynamic to support it, serves in fact to weaken it, and gives credit to the opposite position that defines it from the sub-national position. The latter is reinforced by American hegemony in the Middle East, the dynamics of globalisation, Israeli supremacy, not to mention a "post-modern" trend that defies enlightenment, reason and the very concept of the state.

All this goes to say that any policy or cultural practice that bestows on the Syrians a supra Syrian identity (Arab or Islamic), or one that falls short of what is required (sectarian or ethnic) will result in distorting the genuine representation of social realities on the ground, and could lead to major national problems. Not least of these is the existing dictatorship whose dismantlement is now at least as dangerous a prospect as simply keeping it in place. This is due to

the fear that, just as we are witnessing in Iraq today, the dictatorship's collapse will go hand in hand with the country's dismemberment along ethnic and sectarian lines. These fears are closely linked to the fact that dictatorship in the Middle East is communal, ethnic, religious, sectarian, tribal or based on notability, meaning that groups that closely identify with tyrannical regimes will stand to lose a lot if these change, while other groups bear all sorts of grudges. This long-lasting community-based dictatorship has thoroughly corrupted national policy and principles, destroyed trust and understanding among the citizens and by so doing, has contributed to weakening barriers against civil strife. This is how fear of change gradually started replacing hope for change; a collective psychological development born no doubt out of the disaster in Iraq.

What could stop such fearful prospects in their track is for the cultural and political elite to focus its attention on the issue of Syrian national identity. This is not an ideological bias as much as it is a political and practical endeavour linked to the rehabilitation of the context in which Syrians actively interconnect, interact and identify, away from narrow social interests, and the risks of infighting and internal division. It is not a secret to anyone that fear of internal division is currently stronger than the possibility of Syria being incorporated into a wider political context. This is why we say that Arabism, Islamism, Greater Syrian nationalism and Syrian nationalism are neither genuine choices compatible with the complex Syrian national identity nor rivals to it. They are possible mainstays of Syrian nationalism which cannot be defined without them or against them. Mainstays, however, are not the building itself and it is not intellectually and politically right to create a mutually exclusive relationship between them. Rational Syrian patriots need to overcome what I would call the childish nationalism, or the act of bestowing a blanket nationalist

identity on specific social and cultural bonds, such as Islamic, Arab and Greater Syrian nationalism. This will simultaneously destroy the value of these moral ties and ruin national political life. The opposite could be also true: psychological and political opening towards Arab, Islamic and Greater Syrian ties could be a factor of cultural wealth that bestows upon our country a measure of spiritual depth and strengthen its character.

In the short run, let us reiterate that the grand designs of Greater Syria, a Unified Arab State or a Single Islamic entity do not erect any barriers against the dangers of ethnic and sectarian infighting. In fact, they could very well facilitate falling into this trap by advocating a utopian absolute opposite.

A Critique of "Syria First"

Added to the three above-mentioned nationalist tendencies, is yet a fourth that again seeks to simplify matters: the "Syria First" call, which is no more than an attempt to confer on the country a simple, Syrian identity to replace other simple identities. Nothing is more telling about the simplistic and exclusive nature of this identity than the fact that it is put forward as an exclusive alternative to Arabism, and wavers between reservation and enmity towards Islam. What is most telling, however, is that its advocates seems to be very close to the Arabist regime in power, which both presupposes and imposes absolute homogeneity on its Syrian subjects, without this presumed "Arabism" being anything more than just a slogan!

The approach favoured here is a complex and all encompassing vision of the Syrian identity, a vision open towards Arabism, Islam and the Greater Syria notion, that tries to incorporate them, strives to assimilate Christianity as a religion and Kurdish identity as an ethnicity, a vision

that does not make Islam the exclusive origin of Syria's modern social and cultural history. It is a vision that accommodates the entire gamut of the Syrian citizenry.

"Syria First" cannot possibly respond to these needs. It is an exclusivist nationalist bias that competes against two or three other similar biases. Any such exclusive nationalist tendency finds its political expression in dictatorship. This is why the current regime does not object to any nationalist tendency and, above all, to "Syria First", no matter how contradictory the notion is to its basic ideology. What it might perceive as a danger is a complex understanding of Syrian society because it will necessitate the reconstruction of the political system to suit social realities on the ground.

The greatest political challenge Syria will face in the near future is how to democratise its political system, and ensure the Syrian population a dynamic representation, away from the "consensual democracy" that provides them with "silent representation" and is vulnerable to repeated break-downs as the case of Lebanon shows. This is a difficult course, but we will attempt to formulate certain answers at the end of this paper.

The object of criticism here is the nationalistic, absolutist and exclusive nature of Arabism, Islamism and Syrian nationalism. We see no difference between Islamism and Baathism although the former did not yet try its hand at government. Just as Baathism endeavours to return Syria to Arabism and the Syrians to the Arab fold, Islamism endeavours to return Syria to Islam and the Syrians to the Muslim fold. Baathist Syria gives us therefore, a good first impression of what Islamic Syria would be like, a one-party state, ideological, tyrannical, fragile and liable to collapse at any moment. The Islamists cannot be real democrats if they fail to see Syria as a complex society, constantly

producing novel social configurations that cannot be drawn-down to a single simple formula. "Syria First" is nothing but a smaller version of other nationalist currents. It has the same tendency for dictatorship without the benefit of a cultural and value basis similar to theirs.

In fact, a non-nationalist system in Syria could draw on Arabism and the popularity it still enjoys to help bring a number of Syrians together (the majority in fact, including most Christians) provided it sheds its tendency towards despotism and uniformity. Islam could play a similar role and unite another sector of the Syrian population (including most of the Kurds) if it is not crudely politicised. As for "Syria First", even though it is an ideologically distorted formula, it could serve as a vital reminder of the need to invest politically and culturally in Syria as the one comprehensive and unifying framework for a wide variety of Syrians.

From a Different Angle

In the final analysis, Arabism is part of Syria and not the other way round, and Islam is part of Syria and not the other way round. The supremacy of Syrianism, i.e. Syria as a national state for all Syrians, over Arabism and Islamism is what could unify the Syrian people and guarantee their equality.

Our problem today is the alienation of the Syrian people from the political, symbolic and intellectual institutions of their modern state. The current organisational, legal and intellectual formulae for national unity are incapable of responding to the need for genuine unity among the country's population, if not an all out obstacle to the country's aspirations in that domain. The solution, I argue, lies in that Syrianism provides a progressive and economical solution to a real existing problem, i.e. the problem of national unity among the Syrian

people. It is progressive because it offers a desirable framework for personal identification and incorporation, easy to activate, for a population in dire need of such a framework which otherwise runs the risk of eventual dismemberment and dispersal. It is economical because Syria already exists, it does not need to be invented; we are not talking about subdividing an existing wider framework, nor are we trying to pre-empt a merger within a wider context. I am talking about investing positively in an already existing framework, to incorporate all Syrians in a manner to strengthen this framework and make it division-proof. With a more assertive personality and strengthened self-confidence, a re-defined Syria would also be able to interact positively with its Arab milieu.

Reforming Arabism

A reasonable and democratic approach, in my view, is to reject the premise that the relationship between strengthening individual countries and aspirations towards Arab unity is a zero sum game. Why should the achievements of individual countries be seen as a loss for Arabism, and the latter as able to triumph only at the expense of individual countries? In Syria, a country established originally as a nucleus for a wider Arab entity, this is a very vital issue. No doubt, among the main reasons for the failure of the Arab nationalist movement is its disregard for the facts on the ground, namely that there are independent sovereign states whose citizens were never told they belonged to any other entity.

To change our political thinking and empower our individual states, we need to get rid of the zero sum game and turn the page on worn-out approaches of the likes of "Syria First" and "Jordan First". Today, we feel that the transformation of individual states into reasonable and effective frameworks for citizenship, and the

transformation of Arabism into a framework for strategic, economic and cultural interaction are two things that we ought to be working on simultaneously. Bolstering Arabism is a material and moral boost for these countries, and a source of unity for their diverse religious and sectarian societies. Likewise, strengthening individual countries is a source of confidence for their citizens, not all of whom are Arabs, and provides them with a suitable framework they can identify with. For example, strengthening Egypt's unique character and independence is a guarantee for its Coptic citizens, and bolstering Syria's unique character is a guarantee for its Kurds and Assyrians, whose loyalty to it, in turn, will be strengthened. The same applies to Lebanon, Sudan, Iraq and Bahrain...

The relationship between individual countries and the comprehensive Arab entity could be one of complementarily not rivalry; a complementarily based on the distribution of roles. Identity and citizenship cannot be fulfilled by Arabism; conversely, strategic, economic, and cultural functions cannot be ascribed to individual states. What could unify the Syrians, guarantee their equal citizenship rights and preserve the cohesion of their country is a Syrian democratic national identity; and what could provide Syria with strategic and moral depth, and a framework for economic partnership, is only its Arab milieu.

Towards a Democratic Syrian Identity: the Damascus Declaration

Efforts to reform the concept of Syrian national identity are closely tied to the need for a deep overhaul of Syria's political system because there is a coincidence between distorting the facts about Syria's social representation and distorting those about its political representation. Reforming the country's political representation

requires coming to terms with the facts about Syrian society, and developing a more accurate representation of the country's social and historical realities. A democratic transformation is not possible without paying due attention to the inherited notions on which despotism was based. It is high time that Arabism stops paying the price for its national representation, i.e. as a simple homogenous identity, imposed on highly complex societies.

The "Damascus Declaration for National Democratic Change" is certainly the first attempt of its kind in Syria's modern history to tackle the issue of identity with a spirit of national responsibility, and as part of an effort to affect real democratic change. The Declaration talks about the "right of national minorities to express themselves" and undertakes to work towards ensuring "the right of all social groups in Syria, regardless of their religious, national and social background, to get involved in political activity." It also advocates finding a just and democratic solution to the Kurdish issue in Syria, in a manner that guarantees equal citizenship for Syrian Kurds, including nationality and cultural rights, the right to learn their own national language and other constitutional, political, social and legal rights based on the unity of Syria's land and people." A relatively wide opposition coalition gathered round this document released on 16 October 2005, which included Arabs, Kurds and Assyrians, secularists and Islamists, in addition to democrats, liberals and Arab nationalists. In a country that has long suffered from a totalitarian despotism which, for three long decades, sought to separate political power from any form of stable social bases, and deprived social classes of their public and political character, the experience is indeed important. But precisely because of this situation, such demands for political change were ostracised from social groups within the country, as was the case in Eastern

European countries, and relegated them to mere movements of political intellectuals and activists. This is where the coalition behind the "Damascus Declaration" languishes today, with the exception of its nationally-based Kurdish component, whose popular base proved easier to mobilise (though it is not necessarily more reasonable), than other heavily hemmed-in social groups.

The Damascus Declaration, however, stopped short of engaging in serious discussions regarding Syria's social make up and its national identity. The approach it took merely suggested a sound orientation but it barely left a dent on the discussions surrounding Syria's national identity, which continue to suffer from embarrassment, confusion, irresponsibility and recklessness.

How can interest in Syria's social diversity be garnered in support of transition towards democracy? How can we get rid of a despotism intricately linked to social politics and itself in deep crisis, while avoiding the risk of national disintegration or falling again into so-called "consensual democracy"? The state of Syrian and Levantine political thought does not allow a clear answer to these questions. It seems that everything is ultimately linked to finding a solution to the crisis of intellectual and political leadership that our collective national polity suffers from, and consequently to the rise of a new national majority.

The absence of a leading force, or a dominant social group, manifests itself in a mixture of more violent unchecked despotism, and the risk of national division and civil strife. The rise of a new, post-nationalistic majority capable of shaping a new hegemonic framework of its own, is liable to lay the ground for democracy and national cohesion to overcome the dual problem of despotism and sectarianism. Will the rise of such a majority precede or follow the end of despotism? Will the

solution to the crisis of hegemony precede political reform or follow it? Historical processes rarely adhere to political deadlines or time themselves according to them. Perhaps current efforts underway today to build new organised and reasonable power groups in Syria, despite the severity of our local political conditions, would be seen one day as fundamental contributions towards solving the crisis of hegemony, and the formation of the Syrian national majority.

We cannot over-stress, in this contest, the importance of embarking on an all-embracing, courageous, responsible and reasonable discussion round all our current intellectual and political issues, and the conditions that will give rise to a wide national democratic movement in Syria. We are in a historic transition period, and it is incumbent upon all activists to play a

bigger role than they have before.

There are obvious difficulties in making this transition. The possible eruption of regional and civil strife, the emergence of new forms of violence and the expected social, intellectual, political and psychological struggles might take a few years or decades of instability and reconfiguration. But these are not valid arguments for maintaining the status quo. Awareness by intellectuals of the need to undertake a responsible critique, give priority to national issues rather those of marginal groups, parties and sects and defend general human values, will give potential reconfigurations (and the likely convulsions that will accompany the transition period) a public and national meaning, and make them part of a sustainable national democratic reconstruction process.

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