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THE SECTARIAN MENACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST: THE OTHER 'SAMSON OPTION' *

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I would like to thank the Istanbul Medeniyet University for the honour of delivering this keynote speech, and I would like not to waste this opportunity with engaging in idle academic banter. There is nothing wrong with idle academic banter when the time is right, but at grave times like this, it is the duty of intellectuals to speak to urgent and pressing matters of concern to the ordinary man and woman in the community.

When addressing the issue of civilisations, the first thing to note is that civilisations are by necessity pluralist. We cannot thus speak of 'Protestant' or 'Shiite' civilisations. And even though it is habitual to speak of civilisations as being Roman, Islamic, Greek, Persian, Chinese, etc., a civilisation that deserves the name must be able to accommodate a plurality of religions, ethnicities, and sub-cultures. For this purpose, ethnic cleansing in the name of 'purification', or the genocidal subjugation of the other, represent the other pole to civilisation, and in fact, the epitome of barbarism. That is why the Quran holds the Pharaonic persecution and genocidal subjugation of Egypt's Israelite minority as the epitome of evil. Similar acts of barbarism are universally viewed with repugnance. And that is why Gibbon's famous blaming of the collapse of the Roman Empire on the rise of Christianity should be read in reverse: it is in fact the brutal persecution of Christians which signalled the collapse of the Roman civilisation and the subsequent withering away of the Empire. This is again the translation of another Quranic law of history:

ونريد أن نمن على الذين استضعفوا في الأرض ونجعلهم أئمة ونجعلهم الوارثين

(And we have willed to bestow Our favour on those persecuted on earth, and to make them leaders and to make them inheritors of the Earth)

According to this norm, victims of genocidal violence will in fact always be the winners: they will inherit the earth and become a moral inspiration. For their very survival and prosperity sends a signal that genocidal crime is not only evil, but also futile.

This may raise questions about why, modern western 'civilisation' (a claim questioned by Gandhi in his famous quip: 'It would be a very good idea', when replying to the question: What do you think of Western civilisation?) seems to be limitlessly expanding, as Toynbee opined, in spite of its extensive and woeful record of genocidal enterprises?

This is indeed a question worthy of reflection. However, this civilisation appears to be moving towards solving this apparent paradox in a number of ways: globalising itself and thus diluting its sins (and attempting to partially atone for them); self-destructing through vandalising the environment; and adopting the suicidal policy of MAD (mutual assured destruction), whereby the superpowers ensure that the whole planet could be obliterated at the push of one button. This may be the first time in history that a 'civilisation' has adopted suicide as its ultimate defence policy. And with the recent chaos and uncontrollable proliferation of destructive capacities, this suicidal end may be nearer than we hope.

This MAD-ness has also been imported to our region in the form of Israel's so-called 'Samson Option': the equally suicidal policy of amassing a nuclear arsenal which, if ever used, will bring about the end of Israel and turn the whole region into a nuclear wasteland. The policy, as Seymour Hersh had perceptively and ironically note, was modelled on the myth of Samson, that early proto-type of tragic 'superhero'/suicide terrorist, who brought down the temple on himself and his enemies in an act of desperate vengeance. So spare a thought, when analysing the many 'irrational' suicidal bombers blighting our geographic and cultural landscapes these days, to these poor suicidal nations and civilisations. At least there is some residual element of 'rationality' in the approach of the individual suicidal bomber, since he believes (however erroneously) that he will go to paradise. Those with fingers on buttons ready to obliterate every living creature on earth, have no such mitigating narratives. For them, it will be the end, fullstop. They will be creating their own hell and abiding in it forever.

It is a matter for anthropologists to explore why, given the intense debates these days over suicide bombing and various acts of terrorism, scholars do not seem to see 'suicidal states' and 'suicidal civilisations' an issue worth losing sleep over. It is a mark of our times that , in a world run by five 'great powers', defined mainly by their possession of nuclear arsenals sufficient to pulverise our planet many times over, our obsession is with the solitary suicide bomber who can only harm a few people. Why has the big MAD-ness disappeared completely from our radar, while the small madness looms so large in our focus?

Recently, I finished an edited volume which argues that all these types of madness (genocide, ethnic mass terrorism, tyranny, or the excesses of the 'war on terror') are linked by certain types of framing and justifying narratives. Usually, unless one is a psychopath (and there are quite a few of those around, unfortunately), one only engages in violence for what they see as a legitimate reason, and to the level which achieves a given objective. Mainly, the objective is protecting oneself against perceived threats. Thus violence is normally justified in the context of narratives of insecurity: the other represents a serious threat to one's freedom, interests, identity or core values. Those engaged in genocidal violence or mass terrorism are usually possessed by their own terror narratives about uncontrollable threats posed by the others, whose very existence is a mortal danger. People craft their own horror world, and then enact the script which it dictates.[1]

If we accept this view, then the terrorist who pulls the trigger on a suicide vest, and the head of state who launches a nuclear weapon, are both enacting the same script of defending oneself against barbarism by engaging in a barbaric act. For them, this is the proverbial 'lesser evil'. So why do we live in terror of the sole terrorist who might blow a bus, or the 'rogue state' which might possess a couple of nuclear bombs, and not worry about the person who has the power to blow us all to smithereens at the touch of a button? Why are Iran's non-existent nuclear weapons more of a terror than Israel's existent ones?

Well, the framing narrative for such a stance goes like this: those sitting on top of the vast nuclear arsenals in Washington, Moscow, Beijing, London, Paris or Tel Aviv, and even in New Delhi and Islamabad, are 'responsible' individuals who are also restrained by 'rational' and responsible institutions. In other words, they are 'civilised' and trustworthy, while the others are Barbarians whose acts cannot be predicted. Let us hope that some of this is true, for our lives depend on it. But we will all be forgiven if we profess to a great deal of scepticism.

But let us leave these reflections for another occasion.

My concern today is with another 'Samson Option', the fear that whatever is left of an 'Islamic civilisation' is in danger of blowing itself up into myriads of fragments. The concern here is not with the plague of extremism blighting the lands from Afghanistan and Pakistan, down to Mali and Nigeria, although this is problem enough. I am speaking here about the murderous sectarian polarisation which is manifesting itself in conflicts from Lebanon and Syria to Iraq and Bahrain, and creating irreconcilable divisions across the Muslim world. This divide is unprecedented

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[1] Abdelwahab El-Affendi, ed., *Genocidal Nightmares: Narratives of Insecurity and the Logic of Mass Atrocities*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, forthcoming.

in its size, extension, impact or accompanying violence. Never in the whole history of Islam has so many groups engaged in such levels of destructive violence, across such wide areas, and against the background of such an ugly rhetoric of hate. Even though sectarianism has manifested itself early in Islamic history, and in many unpleasant forms, the sectarian spirit is antithetical to the spirit of Islam. In fact, on many occasions, the Quran equates sectarianism with unbelief:

ولا تكونوا من المشركين. من الذين فرقوا دينهم وكانوا شيعا كل حزب بما لديهم فرحون

(And be not among the idolaters, among those who have parcelled their faith and have become sects, each group delighting in but what they themselves hold [by way of tenets])

فتقطعوا أمرهم بينهم زبرا كل حزب بما لديهم فرحون

(And they [followers of earlier revelation] have parcelled their affair amongst themselves, each party delighting in but what they themselves hold.)

In this and other verses, sectarianism is equated with holding to part of the truth, and feeling fully satisfied with this partial acquisition.

The 'sectarian spirit ', in a generic sense as a closed meaning system associated with selective ethical blindness, often combines, as one author put it, 'a narrowness of outlook with a breadth of application. It is a matter of seeing the world which one inhabits only from one particular angle; but it is the whole of that world, and not simply a limited part of it, which falls within the scope of the sect's defining dogma.'[2]

The sectarian worldview is delimited by narratively constructed 'meaning systems' that 'appear to be incommensurable... because they are orthodoxies, closed circles of presuppositions'.[3] However, the concept of sect we apply here is slightly different from that of religious sect seen as combining the characteristics of orthodoxy as meaning system, value system and a community of belonging, with the schismatic features of rebellion and separatism.[4] We rather see the sectarian position as a defensively constructed and insular narrative universe, setting itself apart from the rest of the world either by its values or by its stories. It is an 'interpretive community' in Stanley Fish's sense of being 'informed by the same notions of what counts as a fact, of what is central, peripheral, and worthy of being noticed –in short, by the

[2] Anthony Becher, cited in: Dale L. Sullivan, 'Beyond discourse communities: Orthodoxies and the rhetoric of sectarianism', *Rhetoric Review*, 18: 1 (1999), p. 152. To link to this article: http://dx.doi

[3] Sullivan, 'Beyond discourse communities',, p. 152.

[4] Sullivan, 'Beyond discourse communities', pp. 152-7.

same interpretive principles... [and] by a way of perceiving that results in the emergence to those who share it (or those whom it shares) of the same text'.[5]

In this sense, sectarianism is both reflective of a prior attitude of parti pris based on a certain identity, and creative of a new identity based on prior positions and perceived interests, fears, etc. Thus depending on being Arab or Jew, Catholic or Protestant, one is more likely to adopt a narrative foregrounding the claims, fears and prejudices of one side in the conflicts on Palestine or Northern Ireland, respectively, and blotting out or side-lining the suffering and grievances of the other. Ideology could have the same effect, with Marxists and neo-liberals, for example, sure to adopt diametrically opposed narratives on Cuba, Vietnam or African poverty. In our current era, the Islamist-secularist divide is becoming as sectarian as it can get. Sometimes it is like being a fan of a football team. You do not love it less for playing a lousy game.

By the same token, adopting a certain narrative (on the war on Iraq or the conflict in Syria) could in turn become formative of a new 'sectarian' identity that functions as a filter blocking out certain facts and perceptions. In this sense, we can sometimes observe the crystallisation of 'instant sectarianism' in situations where taking a political position can turn rival groups into 'sects'. For example, following the July 3 coup in Egypt in which defence minister Abdul-Fattah Sissi deposed President Mohamed Morsi, the Egyptian political space became polarised between the 'Morsi sect' versus 'Sissi sect'.

The symptoms of this tendency (which I have elsewhere referred to as politicising religion and religionising politics) manifests themselves in many guises, but nowhere has sectarianism manifested itself, both in its conventional sense and the broader sense adopted here, than in attitudes towards the ongoing Syrian crisis. Here also, 'sectarianism' operated both as an identity-dependent bias and an identity-forming narrative. In the Middle East, Shia Muslim communities generally sided with the Assad regime, while Sunni Muslims backed the opposition. At the same time, a narrative portraying the conflict as one between Western domination on the one hand, and anti-imperialism on the other, has also created a polarisation pitting some elements of the old left, together with habitual anti-Western actors, such as Russia and China, on the one side, and pro-Western forces on the other. A significant section of opinion in Africa and the rising nations (such as India and Brazil) also appeared inclined to the 'anti-imperialist' stance.

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[5] Cited in: Erie Martha Roberts, 'Something Fishy is Going On: The Misapplication of Interpretive Communities in Literary Theory', *The Delta*, I: I (2006), p. 33.

Here we have a 'live' demonstration of how the 'sectarian' bias emerges and operates. The two sides purport to espouse the same values, for example, they all oppose the indiscriminate targeting of civilians, the use of chemical weapons or terrorism. However, Syria and its allies would dismiss reports about massacres by pro-regime forces as lies, exaggerations or 'isolated' incidents, and argue that the other side commits more atrocities, or would do, having half a chance. The opposition, by contrast, selectively focuses on regime atrocities, and dismisses the claims and fears of the other side about its excesses as unjustified, exaggerated or misinformed.

One can cite a random example of the 'sectarian' rhetoric in a recent article by a Palestinian columnist who used two lines of argument to support the Syrian regime's narrative about a 'global conspiracy' to undermine Syria's role as the leader of resistance to Western imperialism and Israeli hegemony. The first is an a priori claim: 'Whenever I see an alliance led by America and incorporating Britain, France and some oil countries, in particular Qatar and Saudi Arabia, then I declare myself, without hesitating for an instant, against such an alliance.'[6] The other line is less dogmatic, and cites as evidence the 'systematic destruction' of Syria which seeks to eliminate the country from the regional power equation. Those who blame the regime for the destruction deliberately overlook the role of the armed groups and those who arm and fund them. They also ignore the measures taken against Syria in the Arab League, from which it is now suspended. The 'conspiracy' sought to undermine the peaceful democratic activism, just as other Arab Spring experiments have been subverted and side-tracked into internal conflicts. The aim is not to promote the illusory 'American- and oil states-backed democracy', but to precipitate the break-up of Syria into warring state-lets in order to safeguard Israeli-American hegemony. The writer ended by calling on nationalist forces to 'stand firmly with Syria against the conspiracy' and hesitate no more, since the enemy is now evidently clear.[7]

What is equally interesting is the reaction of the readers of the left-leaning pro-Arab nationalist paper in which the article was published. The majority of members of this 'interpretive community' backed the author and hailed his courageous and insightful piece, even though a significant number dissented, challenging the author on factual claims, analyses and moral judgements.

Again, we are left with irreconcilable narratives and the question: Is there, then, no way of arbitrating such claims? Well, our argument is that 'sectarian' claims may be incommensurable and irreconcilable, but they cannot be morally equivalent. Many in 1930's Germany had irrational, but genuine, fears about 'global conspiracies'

against their country, and traumatic memories about recent tragedies. So did Serbs and Hutus in the 1990s regarding their status in their respective countries. Ironically, the actions taken by elites in response to these fears turned them into a reality: the world did indeed gang up against Germany, the Hutus confronted the very scenario of subjugation they dreaded, and the Serbs lost most of the very territory they contested, and some more. It is therefore relevant to evaluate such narratives in terms of moral consequences, among other considerations.

There are two sides to this challenge. First, there is the tendency of this sectarian confrontation to career towards a virtual Samson Option, in which the Muslim Umma implodes through successive processes of sectarian polarisation, escalating extremism and finally a big bang as the two extremist poles confront each other in a fight to the finish. Then there will be no need to drop a nuclear bomb or two, as some American and Israeli extremists have been urging for some time now. The locals would do the job themselves, and the Umma will self-destruct with little outside help. One has just to look at the devastated Syrian cities and villages. It would have taken worst enemy a long time, and plenty of hate, to do that damage.

Even more seriously, while this carnage is going on, the Umma is haemorrhaging morally. The most tenuous claim to being a distinct civilisation, even in this era of globalisation, must entail a modicum level of moral self-sufficiency. Responses to the Syrian crisis manifest, however, moral deficiencies bordering on total moral bankruptcy. The combination of collusion and powerlessness in the face of the genocidal violence taking place against the Syrian people, and the simultaneous blaming of foreigners for the carnage and appeals to them to fix it, all this does little to substantiate claims about the existence of a Muslim community, let alone an Islamic civilisation.

We cannot speak of a civilisation when it is this invisible. We cannot speak of a 'dialogue of civilisations' when we ourselves cannot perform dialogue except through the barrel of a gun or from behind a wall of hate.

I would paraphrase Gandhi, only slightly, here. A Muslim civilisation? It would be a really very good idea! The millions of displaced Syrians facing another bleak winter would also agree.

Thank you very much!