

Ambassador Nawaf Salam

Time to Reclaim the Nahda Spirit

Keynote Speech

At

Jamhour Alumni US (JAUS) Dinner

New York / November 8, 2014

Ladies and Gentlemen,

From the outbreak of Ebola in West Africa to the rising tensions in the East and South China Seas; from the increasing amount of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere to the specter of a new Cold War now haunting Europe with the crisis in Ukraine; and from the unprecedented humanitarian tragedy caused by the growing number of displaced people worldwide which has, for the first time in the post-World War II era, exceeded 50 million people to the enormous casualties of the ethnic fighting in South Sudan, the Mexico drug war, the conflict in the Central African Republic, and the persistent violence in Somalia, Mali, and Nigeria, we can easily conclude that we don't only live in a complicated world, but also in dangerous times.

However, let me underline that no region in the world faces today more violence, and as difficult challenges, as the one region that I have not yet mentioned, which is the Arab world with the ongoing civil war in Syria, the threats of dismemberment of Iraq, the insurgency in Yemen, the chaos in Libya, the disastrous effects of the war on Gaza, and the dangers looming over Lebanon.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Almost four years ago the act of a certain Mohammad Bouazizi who set himself on fire in the remote town of Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia triggered an unprecedented movement of youth protests across the Arab world. Issues of dignity, freedom, bread, and jobs became the common themes of these uprisings. Before turning to "*what went wrong?*" with most of this "Arab spring" - or "Awakening" if you prefer - it is important to recall the deep crises which have marked the Arab world on the eve of these uprisings. First and foremost, there has been a profound crisis of political legitimacy in the Arab world.

In the first decades that followed independence, radical regimes were established in the core Arab states, such as Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Algeria, as well as in Libya and to a certain extent in Yemen. All of them followed a pattern of one-party rule. Only a strong state, it was then argued, could mobilize all the popular energies to achieve national liberation, stand up to Israel, and realize the aspirations of Arab unity. Allegedly, only such strong state could also achieve economic development, and social justice.

To pursue such goals, citizens of these regimes were asked not only to relinquish their rights to political participation but also to accept the coercive methods of their governments. A mixture of populist ideology and repressive institutions worked hand in hand to ensure the legitimization of such states and the subjugation of their societies.

This trade off of political rights for promises of social justice and national liberation was paralleled in the *rentier* states, the oil states of the Gulf, by another trade off, that of participatory demands for promises of material wealth.

These models of governance, or what political scientists call “ruling bargains”, have been facing serious problems. The radical regimes have clearly suffered from an erosion of their legitimacy, for not only have their nationalist strategies vis-à-vis Israel not heeded any success, they have also dramatically failed to deliver on their promises of development and social justice. Paradoxically, the conservative monarchies have done better in this respect because they could still draw on their traditional sources of legitimacy (such as religion and/or family lineage), and most of them were able to benefit from the flow of oil revenues.

This fundamental legitimacy crisis was further aggravated by two factors. The first is what I would call “the attrition of power”; in French they say the *le pouvoir use*. Just consider the following: before his fall, Saleh had been in power in Yemen for 43 years, Qaddafi in Libya for 42, Mubarak in Egypt for 30, and Ben Ali in Tunisia for (only) 24! Not only have these rulers exercised absolute power for so long, all but the latter were preparing their own sons for their succession.

The second factor is the role played by the spread of corruption in the Arab world. For the youth that took to the streets, corruption was a tangible matter associated with names of real people; it was not represented by a mere figure of a Transparency International index or a World Bank statistic. In Tunisia for example, the protesters were targeting Ben Ali’s wife, Leila Trabelsi, based on the latest Wikileaks cables which had revealed how much her family was involved in “shady business”.

For decades, the Arab world had also suffered from economic stagnation. Over a thirty year period, our region had a GDP per capita growth greater only to that of sub-Saharan Africa. However, what did not fail to grow during this time period is

population, as is well illustrated by the fact that 65% of Arabs today are under the age of 25. This sharp increase in youth resulted in a sharp increase in job demands, while Arab economies remained unable to cope with it.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Bouazizi's act of self-immolation was obviously an act of profound despair. But the youth protests that followed had generated a lot of hope across the region and the term "Arab Spring" was intended to reflect this initial optimism.

However, in most instances the goal of a "civil" and "democratic" state, which was - alongside the dignity and liberty mottos - the main rallying cry of the Arab youth who took to the streets, was undermined by the weight of tribal, confessional, and ethnic forces and/or derailed by the militancy of extremist Islamist groups and their violent methods. This was indeed but exacerbated by those regimes which resorted to the most brutal methods to suppress the uprisings.

But let us not forget that we are only at the very beginning of a new era, as transitions are usually long processes which unfold over decades and not years, not to mention that history does not generally follow a linear course, but rather routes full of unpredictable twists and turns, and ups and downs.

It remains that we are now witnessing bloody civil wars and accelerated processes of disintegration in many Arab states, as well as the successes of radical Islamist groups in seizing control, in more than one country, of vast territories and imposing their tyrannical rule there; let alone the proclamation of one of these groups of a so-called "Islamic State" in total disregard to the borders, territorial integrity and sovereignty of the existing states, and of course to the will of the overwhelming majority of the inhabitants of these lands.

All this led some commentators to affirm that what we are now witnessing is but the end of the 1916 Sykes-Picot order. For the sake of historical accuracy, let us first recall that the new states which emerged in the Middle East after the end of World War I, and the 1919 Paris peace conference, were not a simple projection of the map of the Sykes-Picot agreement itself, but rather a renegotiated and significantly amended version of it.

More importantly, however, is the fact that all these new states, which were perceived by many at their creation as "colonial" products, nonetheless ended up

gaining both legitimacy and resiliency owing not only to the passing of time, but also to the setbacks of the pan-Arab and pan-Syrian movements that insisted on referring to them as “artificial entities”.

Accordingly, it is difficult to conclude from the sole proclamations and cross-border actions of some extremist groups that this whole post-World War I state system, with its official state borders, is now simply collapsing. Let me rather suggest that the survival of most of these states, within their recognized boundaries, has never been more contingent on the need to substantially reconsider the internal (as opposed to external) boundaries which they have erected between their various social components. In other words, the maintenance of the territorial integrity of most of these states has increasingly become dependent on achieving a more inclusive and equitable redistribution of domestic power.

As to the militant Islamist extremists and their violent and terrorist methods, we need first and foremost to stress, that though very powerful they remain a marginal minority among Moslems. The rise of these movements (such as Daesh or ISIS) is more the expression of a radical communitarian phenomenon than of any religious fervor as such. In fact, these movements feed upon a number of diverse, complex, and interrelated social, economic and political factors, much more than on ideology, mainly:

One, the sense of frustration and deprivation which is generated at the national level by long years of living under oppressive regimes and situations of repression and poverty – not to mention that these situations are also often aggravated by a feeling of exclusion where sectarian policies prevail;

Two, the sense of humiliation and dispossession at the regional level which is largely produced by the enduring tragedy of the Palestinian people and the unabated aggressive Israeli colonial policies;

Three, the sense of increased alienation and marginalization in a globalized world which is perceived as more and more dominated by Western models and culture.

Understanding these feelings and grievances is not legitimizing them. On the contrary, this is a necessary condition to better fight not only the Islamist extremists but the conditions that create Islamic extremism. And it is important to

stress that there cannot be a mere military solution to this phenomenon, for it is only by addressing the root causes that lead to this extremism that this battle can be truly won.

To a great extent the future of our part of the world will be determined by the big struggle, not between Sunni and Shi'a Islam as it is often advanced, but rather by the more fundamental one, between the different versions of militant Islamic extremism on the one hand, and the mainstream moderate interpretations of Islam, whether Sunni or Shi'a, on the other hand. It is a battle between fanaticism and enlightenment, between dogmatism and rationalism. It is a battle between literalists and reformists, between fundamentalists and modernists.

But let us not lose sight that this struggle, as big as it may be, is in turn part of a larger one which includes both Moslems and Christians, and Arabs and Kurds; it is a battle for diversity and tolerance, a battle for pluralism and freedom, a battle for citizenship and equality in our part of the world.

Ladies and Gentleman,

We are at a crossroads. The stakes are high; and we should mobilize all our resources to win this battle.

Based on its specific historical experience, and the richness of the lessons to be learned from both its successes and failures, Lebanon, with its social and religious diversity, its culture of openness and freedom, its vibrant civil society, can and should play a leading role in this battle.

First and foremost, we should reclaim the spirit of the Arab renaissance or *Nahda*, which started in the second half of the 19th century, and we should build upon the progressive legacy of its great figures, the likes of Ibrahim al Yazigi, Sheikh Abdel Kader Al Qabbani, Butrus al Bustani, Sheikh Ahmed Aref al-Zein, and Jirgi Zeidan,.

Also, schools and universities in Beirut and Mount-Lebanon were not only one of the main pillars of the *Nahda*, they became the model of modern education throughout the region. In view of the nature of the problems surrounding us today, more than at any other time, pioneer centers of learning in Lebanon [like *Jamhour*] should be supported in their mission of providing our youth with both the

knowledge and the methods of critical thinking, which will allow them to better deal with the challenges of our times and to become more responsible citizens.

The regional role awaiting Lebanon is big. But the regional dangers facing it are no less big. Hence, to shield itself, as much as possible, from the fallouts of the ongoing Syrian conflict and to preserve its unity and stability, Lebanon should scrupulously abide by the policy of “disassociation” which it officially adopted three years ago.

However, as important as abiding by this policy is, doing so would not be enough to safeguard Lebanon as long as its political system remains highly dysfunctional and its institutions considerably weak.

Twenty five years ago, the Taif accord succeeded in putting an end to sectarian violence in Lebanon, but it did not prevent the consolidation of sectarian practices that followed. One should however recognize that Taif was only partially implemented, and that many of its provisions were distorted in application. Hence, it is high time to see Taif fully and rightly implemented; but it is perhaps also time to start thinking beyond Taif.

No less important is that the low sense of “*res publica*” or “commonwealth” in the Lebanese political culture ought to be addressed as well. In fact, both the concepts of “public interest” and of “public property” have remained weak notions in Lebanon. The same could also be said of the notions of “public responsibility” and of “public accountability”.

This clear need to promote “civic” values brings us back again to the critical role that education can and must play.

“You reap what you sow”, say the scriptures.

Therefore, for freedom, tolerance, pluralism, justice, equality, citizenship, human rights and the rule of law to prevail, the surest path is to continue supporting the cause of liberal and high quality education.

Thank you very much.