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The West's Legacy in the Middle East Troubles, Challenges and Perspectives

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1- Background

This is not an ordinary conference. One hundred years have elapsed since the Paris Peace Conference (1919), and yet we are in the midst of international crises that are not unlikely to lead to war-style conflicts. It is useful to recall the facts and decisions of the Paris Peace Conference (1919), which did not last more than twenty years before the outbreak of the Second World War (1939), it is however urgent to think together about the actions to be taken against the structural cracks that have emerged in the last 20 years and entrenched so firmly through the rise of populism, racial nationalism, and xenophobia. Aren't these the phenomena that assassinated the facts and decisions of the Paris Peace Conference twenty years later its adoption?

The context of this 1st seminar might not allow me to deep dive into the root causes of the failure of the Paris Peace Conference (1919). I will rather focus on its theme which is "**The West's Legacy in the Middle East**", and therefore I would like to highlight three topics:

1. Europe and the Middle East: The dilemma of colonial mentality.
2. Europe and the Middle East: Minorities and majorities between Islamophobia and Christianophobia.
3. The Middle East and Europe: The tragic geopolitics.

I will conclude with the necessity to build an interreligious peace alliance, as expressed by the leading Swiss theologian Hans Küng. The search for an agreed basis for interfaith action for a better world was given a new impetus in 1992 with the publication of Küng's *Global Responsibility*. His argument was summarized in the now well-known mantra: "*No peace among the nations without peace among the religions*"

1. Europe and the Middle East: The dilemma of colonial mentality!

There is no room anymore for dealing with the Middle East with a colonial mindset. The colonialism produced somehow the tragedy of Palestine and all the tragedies. It is irresponsible to support regimes that exploit the resources of their countries and undermine the dignity of their people. It is absolutely immoral that political intersections and regional international alliances are based on the logic of western interventions and draw power from them. It is high time to complement common interests with common values. This context brings back into my mind the Lebanese philosopher René Habachi who wrote on June 21, 1964, I quote: "*The Mediterranean Sea is not just a lake, nor a simple cartographic object. It is above all a cultural phenomenon that was reflected throughout history... to a point the current Mediterranean transcended the conceptual sphere to become sketched in the human conscience.... According to*

Habachi, this lake was not as narrow as to allow the intermingling of its cultures, nor it was as vast as to separate its shores. It had moderate dimensions that allowed these cultures and civilizations to differentiate from each other and achieve a better fusion. This is how the Mediterranean people were born: people of dialogue who discovered the human dimension, through dialogue, that human dimension exalted in the character of each human being". End of quote.

To get rid of the colonial mentality, Europe and the Middle East should first reproduce the Euro-Mediterranean value-based alliance, to avoid future destructive alliances between extremists. This is the first supposed legitimacy.

2. Europe and the Middle East: Minorities and majorities between Islamophobia and Christianophobia

The minority alliance is resurging in the Middle East and this is extremely dangerous. Minoritism is an ill mentality. Majoritarianism is an ill mentality. The islamophobia is rising in Europe. And the Christianophobia is rising in the Middle East due to what might be considered as a coming-back colonialism. Have not Russia said that its intervention in Syria is a "Holy War"? And instead of producing a system of citizenship that fosters diversity away from radical secularism and religious extremism, we are exchanging the production of phobias. Allow me to draw a special attention to my nowadays confused Lebanon, to approach the controversial issue of minorities and majorities.

- *Lebanon as a prototype*

Who determines Lebanon's national interest and that of its people in the absence of a national security strategy that transcends regional alliances of rival political parties? And who defines the country's strategic options amid the malfunctioning state institutions and a faulty government framework?

In days gone by, the myriad of challenges that a nation faced could have been solved by a strong leader, but this is no longer the case. What is now needed is a combination of sustainable policies to shield Lebanon from the volatility of the Middle East.

Lebanon now finds itself at a crossroad, faced with an existential threat that could destroy its identity. What most analysts seem to miss is the complexity of the threat, which is not merely tied to mass migration and the refugee crisis.

The threat lies in our distorted understanding of reality while political infighting is increasingly becoming part of our national identity and linked to regional dimensions.

It could be argued that this bickering is merely a means to an end, to divert attention from what is really plaguing Lebanon and an attempt to maintain the status quo which is bound to collapse.

With the exception of Jordan (afraid this will not continue), the Middle East is riddled with peculiar variants of status quos, all of which are unsustainable in the long run.

Lebanon is currently being injected with beliefs that were foreign in the not too distant past, most notably the notion of the alliance of minorities.

Another is that of Russia being viewed as the savior of Christians in the Middle East, which is a facade of its greater goal. A goal of reclaiming the glory of its past in the East while breaking the hegemony of the west. It is also far from being rooted in a political ideology with the aim of streamlining a style of governance similar to that of Western liberalism. Simply put, Russia's intervention is one of economic and geopolitical nature.

Yet the Orthodox Church should have drawn on the mistakes of its Catholic cohort, which blessed the crusades almost a thousand years ago.

Christians in the Middle East and Lebanon, in particular, should not seek protection as a minority. Lebanon is home to Christians, Muslims, and Jews who oppose Israel's aggressive tendencies.

Lebanon's charter of 1948 casts aside the notion that minorities need protection from global powers, be it the West or Russia.

Stoking sectarian fears is an assassination of Lebanon's spirit, and leaders from across the board have an obligation to reject the notion that Israel represents today.

3. The Middle East and Europe: The tragic geopolitics

The Middle East seems in its worst shape. Palestine has seen its territory shrink to a sliver of what it once was, Syria is divided into several factions, Lebanon has seemingly surrendered to its fate, and Iraq is still bleeding, while Jordan has ostensibly managed to stay afloat.

Meanwhile, Europe is weakened and unable to either address these divisions or fill the void left by the US, who is now pre-occupied with its own domestic challenges.

Russia, on the other hand, is spearheading a campaign to bolster its status while China is attempting to supersede both the US and Europe economically.

Taking advantage, Iran, through its many proxies across the region, is pursuing its strategy of exporting the Islamic revolution while the Security Council stands idle, drowning in its administrative duties instead of advancing its international peacemaking policies.

As Iran, Turkey, Russia and China gain ground, Europe which remains committed to promoting dialogue, human right values, and stability along the lines of its interest-driven foreign policies, is losing influence in the Middle East.

This is mainly the result of Europe's failure to undertake a balanced intervention that reflects its moral standing of days gone.

Despite the complexity of its own situation with the rise of far-right movements, European leaders must take action if a concrete solution to any of the conflicts spanning the Middle East is to be reached.

- *Europe and Palestine*

Despite Europe intervening to bridge the gap left by the US in the funding of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees, it has come up short in the negotiations process at a time when it should adopt a more dynamic stance. Europe must somehow find a way to abandon its lethargic stance, re-energize the peace process, and bring both Israel and the US to the negotiations table.

This European resignation thus far has dealt a blow to the Palestinian people and their rights.

- *Europe and Syria*

On the Syrian front, it is clear that Europe is still committed to a diplomatic solution but hasn't been able to contain Russia, Iran and Turkey or protect the Syrian people's rights. Its efforts have been merely concentrated on channeling financial and humanitarian aid to ease the suffering of refugees and displaced as reconstruction efforts stall pending a diplomatic solution to the conflict.

The European humanitarian effort should be transformed into a diplomatic efficient framework to restore peace, democracy and stability in Syria. Otherwise, Europe would have failed to uphold its historic moral obligations.

Conclusions

The populist insanity is growing. The danger of the xenophobic propositions, only a few hundred meters from Rome, were faced fiercely by Pope Francis. The pontiff warned against the reappearance of Hitler. He sensed that what is being prepared in Europe and across the world, is a political clash that might not turn into a conflict on the ground, but into an even more dangerous deontological clash.

Pope Francis sensed that there was no room for gray positions when confronting the makers of hatred. The concerns raised by his Holiness are not definitely restricted to racist measures inflicted on refugees, migrants and displaced people under the guise of sovereignty - (it is necessary to define sovereignty precisely because it is a founding structure of any country) - but the Pope's concerns seem to warn that we have taken the path of classifying people on the basis of races and classes, by expressing that recent political rhetoric has echoed that of Hitler: elevating some groups and disdaining some others. The package of sovereign measures, which are noble in principle when talking about the human security framework, falls into the prohibition of existential discrimination. In the United States, President Trump is following the same path by making it harder for migrants to obtain green cards. UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson is also promoting a package of similar measures to curtail the aids granted by the Fund for Global Human Rights UK. In Germany, France, Italy, Hungary and Austria there is also a wave of objections to the continued support for the most marginalized migrants, refugees groups of the so-called non-indigenous citizens. We entered the era of a racial madness. Hence the courageous declaration of Pope Francis was highly prophetic.

There is no need to enlarge on the destructive features of Hitler and Mussolini legacies to the world. Their genes carry megalomania, superiority of race, and ideological pumping into the act of abolishing those who do abide their rules. This is what haunts Pope Francis. He is not only worried about the unfair socio-economic aspect, but also about the marginalization of the structure of the concept of equality and solidarity. Here is the bottom line of what Pope Francis wanted to consecrate based on a constant confrontation with the box of racial madness, on which the Catholic Church and all its allied churches

and other religions have staunchly embarked. We are, I hope, at the beginning of an interreligious alliance established deeply and firmly on human values. It is useful in this hastiness to note that the European Francophone and Anglo-Saxon theology will face at this stage a fundamental ordeal. It is not sufficient to revive Bultmann, Gerhard Ebeling, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Friedrich Gogarten, and Jürgen Moltmann, although each has tried to understand the correlation between European Christianity and the political and social crisis that constitutes the practical phenomenology in electoral programs, the mobilization of grassroots, and the formulation of societal leadership by a technical governance. Their attempt to understand these complexities also remained uncertain.

The experiences of these theologians and others must be replicated, such as the Catholic theologian Johann Baptist Metz, who advocated the fundamental societal role of the Church through the humanization of society, the lessening of greed, exploitation and monopoly, and the elimination of racial and class superiority. These replications have become extremely urgent, yet they are insufficient. They should be accompanied with a shock, in the form of what we have referred to as the “**Interreligious Alliance**” which was shaped by Hans Küng, the Swiss Catholic theologian, who called for a world peace based on freedom and social justice. Pope Francis opened the confrontation with the resurgent Hitler.

We must produce together a Paris Peace Conference 2019 and build a steadfast interreligious/interfaith alliance in the face of those who distort religions under the pretext of defending them.

In this context, the Middle East Council of Churches has launched its initiative “Kairos Middle East: Towards Church Global Compact”, so that the Churches can establish a pro-active diplomacy aimed at achieving peace and protecting human dignity. The Middle East perspectives will be leading as a pilot process.

Critical Questions: (Brainstorming Orientation)

- 1- The **United Nations** is paralysed... How Europe can intervene to make its mission efficient?
- 2- With the Brexit Crisis... what should be the role of the Churches to contribute in alleviating the identities tensions?
- 3- In the context of the Refugees, Migrants and Displaced is it sure that we can solve a security and a political crisis by a socio-economic framework?
- 4- It is not an historical time in which the Churches should redefine their prophetic visions, and professional tools towards a pro-active peace building diplomacy?