

Waiting for the Barbarians

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I am very grateful for this opportunity to share my thoughts on a theme—the world crisis centered in, but by no means limited to, the Middle East—that has been the focus of my intellectual preoccupations for several years now, especially since the advent of the “Arab Spring.” Although it has been assigned to me, the title that appears above, “Waiting for the Barbarians,” is an unsettlingly apt characterization of the prevailing sense of helplessness that clouds the vision and thwarts the actions of too many political and thought leaders of the liberal world.² For this reason, the present essay will have achieved the modest goal set out for it if the author’s personal—and by no means scholarly or philosophical—reflections deposit in the minds of readers the lineaments of some key *alternatives to waiting for the barbarians*.

The most dramatic proof that the liberal world is today dangerously adrift resides in its hesitant, halting, uncoordinated, and spasmodic reactions to the challenge posed by the barbarians of the so-called Islamic State, or ISIS. To be sure, ISIS lacks the sheer power to destroy the *material* basis of the liberal world but they can, by entrenching themselves at the heart of an ancient continent, substantially undermine its *moral* foundations.

Before offering an explication of the ISIS phenomenon, I should like to call attention to a trend that, in my view, weakens the internal solidarity of the liberal world, namely an excessive liberality breaching ethical and natural limits that especially afflicts societies in North America and Europe. I refer, for example, to what I and other Arab

¹ The author dedicates this essay to the memory of Pierre Amine Gemayel (1972-2006), martyred for refusing to wait for the barbarians.

² In a sweeping and still-relevant address delivered at the United Nations in late 1950, the Lebanese statesman Charles Malik gave an excellent summary of the political-social characteristics of a liberal world order, which he argued must include: “the sanctity and dignity of the human person, the ultimacy of freedom of thought and conscience...the rationalizing and humanizing of law...the protection of minorities...the liberation of woman, the spreading of education, the teaching of tolerance, and the principle of government as the expression of the will of the people...” (see “The Problem of Asia,” statement delivered before the Political Committee of the UN General Assembly, 11 December 1950 [Stamford, CT: The Overlook Press, 1951], p. 29).

As used in the present essay, the term “liberal world” comprises not only the established democracies of North America and Europe, but also all those non-Western societies, communities, and individuals who embrace broadly accepted democratic principles and practices. Under this definition Japan and India, for example, are members in good standing of the liberal world, as are those Arabs struggling to consolidate or establish democratic systems in their respective countries.

liberals see as excesses in family matters (breakdown of the traditional family unit), excesses in the traditional media (obsession with sensationalism), and excesses in the Internet (circulation of all manner of unwholesome texts and images).

In my experience, most Arab liberals continue to uphold what they see as traditional spiritual values because they judge them necessary for the preservation of stable family life, which is the basis of a free but grounded society capable of orderly development and improvement. From our (Arab liberal) perspective, the lack of such values leads, in the first instance, to a fraying of personal ties and, ultimately, to a shattering of social cohesion affecting, especially, the youth. Yet it seems that our adherence to traditional spiritual values places Arab liberals, to a measurable degree, at odds with our counterparts in North America and Europe. For this reason, a frank dialogue on social issues is needed so that the two sides—which can loosely be designated as “Western liberals” and “Eastern liberals”—might arrive at a better understanding of each other and then collectively respond more effectively to the prevailing world crisis.

An internal dialogue within the liberal world is relevant to the challenge posed by the barbarians on two levels. First, an internal schism within the liberal world between Westerners and Easterners will only serve to undermine effective responses to all manner of challenges and threats, including ISIS. And second, the kind of violent extremism we see today springs from societies in despair. In reaction to despair certain segments, especially young men, express their alienation by means of violence stimulated by calculated misinterpretations of sacred texts and teachings. To counter such extremism, a coherent counter-worldview—a liberal worldview for constructing a pluralistic civilization—must be articulated and disseminated.

Actions informed by dialogue can help channel two great dynamics at play in the world today: one positive and the other negative. The positive dynamic is characterized by an increasing tempo of change, growing interconnections between cultures, and expanding popular participation in political decision-making at all levels. The negative dynamic is, in effect, a revolt against the positive trajectory and seeks to supplant it with a kind of utopianism promising a return to an imagined—and wholly unattainable—golden age of religious purity.

Concerning the two dynamics and which will prevail over the long-term, I believe that the nature of humankind is fundamentally good and strives toward what is best for individuals, communities, and whole societies: progress and change. Yet the limitation of the positive dynamic is that the road to affirmative development is slow, difficult, and entails incremental steps that often cannot be perceived until after a significant interval of time has passed. Contrariwise, the negative dynamic can produce certain spectacular results quickly, giving an illusion of immediate success. But the negative tendency is by definition destructive of outsiders—and eventually itself—because it relies on violence to bend men and women to its totalitarian will.

For this reason, despite the horrors we see catalogued in the news—which for those of us living in the Middle East are our daily reality—I remain optimistic that we, meaning the liberal world, will regain our bearings and ultimately prevail in the great task of keeping the barbarians at bay, and eventually defeating them. The key will be for the positive forces to keep faith with core spiritual values and principles that no terrorists and no barbarians can break, despite the horrors they can inflict within the areas they rule, and elsewhere by means of spectacular attacks perpetrated by terrorist cells and self-radicalized individuals.

The Nature of the Modern Barbarians

If we—meaning the liberal world—are at the present historical moment in the mode of waiting for the barbarians, then it is both necessary and urgent for us to reflect on two vital questions, namely: “What is the nature of the barbarians storming across the Middle East, the very cradle of human civilization?” And, “What strategies can we implement to contain and eventually defeat those barbarians?” What follows are my reflections on these problems.

From the perspective of the liberal world, two broad categories of barbarians exist that, perhaps, can be referred to as “bandit-barbarians” and “civilizing-barbarians.” Bandit-barbarians, above all, pursue pelf by pillage in the tradition of Attila the Hun. Civilizing-barbarians, in contrast, are far more dangerous because of their deep-seated conviction that they are the carriers of a superior civilization that must dominate, displace, or destroy other expressions of civilization. In other words, civilizing-barbarians refuse to accept that our great house of humanity does and should contain many mansions of civilization, which is to say many corridors to the enhancement of the human experience. For this reason, they are the sworn enemies of a liberal world and its conception of a pluralistic civilization.

ic civilization.

The leaders of Nazi Germany were the ultimate civilizing-barbarians of recent history, and perhaps of all history. Hitler and his propaganda chief, Joseph Goebbels, thought themselves the most civilized of men and flaunted their appreciation for art, architecture, and music.³ But they became personifications of barbarism because they wedded their civilized sensibilities to a boundless urge to dominate or exterminate what they denounced as competing civilizations, most prominently that of the Jews. Unlike Attila,

³ Just one month after launching his war of annihilation against the Soviet Union to exterminate the Slavic peoples and their culture, Hitler “stated that he could not, for anything in the world, live in a country like the United States whose conceptions of life are inspired by the most grasping mercantilism and which does not love any of the loftiest expressions of the human spirit such as music.” See the Italian diplomatic document dated 25 August 1941 (summarizing a conversation between Hitler and his ally and fellow dictator Benito Mussolini) in Malcom Muggeridge, ed., *Ciano's Diplomatic Papers: Being a Record of Nearly 200 Conversations Held During the Years 1936-1942*. trans. Stuart Hood (London: Odhams Press, Ltd., 1948), 451.

For his part, Joseph Goebbels was keen to have himself portrayed by the Nazi propaganda machine—which he himself controlled—“as a civilized European rather than a Nazi radical.” See Paul A. Smith, Jr., *On Political War* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1989), 147.

the opportunistic bandit-barbarian whom Pope Leo dissuaded from pillaging Rome, Hitler the frenzied civilizing-barbarian would never allow himself to be diverted from his maniacal drive to destroy “enemy” civilizations, whether Jewish, Slavic, or that of other “sub-humans.”

Turning to the present, what is the nature of the barbarians that have seized center-stage in the Middle East? Is the Islamic State a horde of bandit-barbarians or a host of civilizing-barbarians? More than a year and a half into the ISIS reign of terror, evidence can be adduced to support both interpretations. On the one hand, the Islamic State engages in the sort of criminal operations practiced by any mafia, albeit on a vast scale, including murder, robbery, extortion, seizure, blackmail, and kidnapping. On the other hand, ISIS carefully dresses even its most barbaric acts in the raiment of professed religious teachings. “ISIS Enshrines a Theology of Rape” is the chilling headline of an extensive report detailing the procedures, infrastructure, and underlying religious justifications of the Islamic State’s systematic sexual enslavement of women and girls.⁴

From my personal perspective, the scope of the intensifying crisis that ISIS had inflicted on the Middle East leads to the conclusion that they must be designated as a threat of civilizational proportions, not merely as a criminal enterprise writ large. I am a native and lifelong resident of a small country—Lebanon—that for better or worse absorbs almost every Arab, Middle Eastern, and global trend; I have been a close student of and participant in Middle Eastern politics on the national and regional levels for well over half a century; I have served in government as a peacetime parliamentarian and wartime president; I have directed an international think tank and one of the Arab world’s oldest political parties; in all of these capacities, I have traveled extensively and visited practically every country in the Middle East, some numerous times over many decades. Given the arc of my career, I am equally saddened and alarmed to conclude that I have never in my political life witnessed Arab civilization in such extreme danger.

Admittedly, assessing the nature and dimensions of any threat can be a subjective process, especially when the hazard in question targets a concept as broad and malleable as “civilization.” Even with the advantage of historical hindsight, we can legitimately debate a question such as: what was the greater barbarism, the Nazi or the Soviet dictatorship? This is an extremely difficult question to answer, one that could degenerate into an unseemly accounting of total numbers killed. A more personalized method of assessment was utilized by the scholar Robert Conquest who, when asked to make such a judgment, would only say that the Nazi holocaust “just feels worse” than Stalin’s crimes.⁵ For me, what ISIS is doing in its zone of mayhem “just feels worse”

⁴ Rukmini Callimachi, “ISIS Enshrines a Theology of Rape,” *New York Times*, 13 August 2015 (available from [<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/14/world/middleeast/isis-enshrines-a-theology-of-rape.html>]; accessed 20 August 2015).

⁵ In *Explaining Hitler: The Search for the Origins of His Evil* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1999), Ron Rosenbaum writes (p. 392): “I had recently read the historian Robert Conquest’s powerful account of Stalin’s crimes. No historian has been harsher in his judgment of Stalin. But Conquest would later tell me

than anything I have seen in the region before. Certainly, the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) and the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990), to cite just two examples, featured their share of barbaric acts, as have all wars.

I have in fact referred to the war in Lebanon as an “eclipse of civilization.” But an eclipse of civilization, like a solar or a lunar eclipse, goes through its cycle and eventually comes to an end. Even if the aftereffects of an eclipse of civilization linger for decades, as they certainly have in Lebanon, the underlying civilization reemerges from the smoke and destruction and continues to provide a framework for, and pattern of, life. Yet, assessing the barbarism of ISIS—which recognizes neither the borders of states nor the boundaries of civilized behavior—I am not at all that sure Arab civilization can survive its depredations over the long-term.

The distinction I am drawing between the degradation of civilization that occurs in the course of all wars and the war *on* civilization perpetrated by the Islamic State can be illustrated by means of a visit to Lebanon’s National Museum in Beirut. There, among priceless antiquities held in trust on behalf of all humanity, one can still view physical scars of war in the form of bullet and shrapnel marks dating from the Lebanese civil war. But these damages, as bad as they are, were essentially side effects of the war in Lebanon; the country’s conflicting factions never sought deliberately to erase the cultural heritage or historical record of any of Lebanon’s diverse communities. In Syria and Iraq, however, ISIS revels in the destruction of museums, archeological sites, and artifacts in a bid to erase the very memory of targeted groups, and of the country as a whole.

Should the Islamic State succeed in eradicating the physical presence and history of whole communities, which is clearly its aim, this would usher in a new dark age. If the ISIS project succeeds, for example, in stamping out Christian, Muslim, Druze, and other communities as vibrant elements of the Middle East mosaic, then we would need to alter the very lexicon we use to describe the region. Recognizing this reality, a decade before his death in 2011 the Lebanese scholar Kamal Salibi noted that “[i]t is the Christian Arabs who keep the Arab world ‘Arab’ rather than ‘Muslim’.”⁶

Before canvassing strategies to counter the Islamic State, I would like to share some thoughts on reasons *why* ISIS has enjoyed such success, starting with a strong appeal among a motley but potent assemblage of former non-Arab Al Qaeda, renegade Iraqi Baathists, disaffected Arab youth, and wayward European teenagers. At the beginning of this essay I referenced the link between societies in despair and the rise of violent extremism. In the Arab world, a powerful driver of such gloom has been the harsh reality that the Arab Spring did not flower into the springtime of Arab peoples. Rather, the Arab Spring was a moment of hope characterized by a fleeting consensus

that—if forced to make a comparison between the two—he’d have to say, however hesitantly and subjectively, that Hitler’s degree of evil ‘just feels worse’ than Stalin’s.”

⁶ See William Dalrymple, “Lost Flock,” *The Guardian*, 29 October 2001 (available from [www.theguardian.com/world/2001/oct/30/pakistan.israelandthepalestinians]; accessed 3 March 2015).

that, unharnessed, was rapidly supplanted almost everywhere by disillusionment and conflict.

Within such a setting of confusion and despair, the Islamic State emerged with its bellicose rhetoric couched in the authoritative cadence of religious discourse. The stark incompatibility between the customs of an imagined past as advocated by ISIS and the fundamental necessities of the present could find no means of reconciliation, save a campaign of rampant and increasingly bizarre violence. The seeming newness of this method—which in fact is medieval both in form and content—has held a powerful appeal for a limited but still impressive pool of mostly Arab and European youth who have enlisted as the Islamic State’s mass of shock troops and select cadre of bloody executioners.

To the immediate context sketched above we can add a timeless insight about the power politics of countering extremism penned by the Austrian statesman Metternich. Writing to one of his ambassadors in 1817 about religiously driven disturbances in Europe, he wrote: “It is, doubtless, worthy of the wisdom of the great Powers to take into consideration an evil [religious fanaticism] which it is possible, and perhaps even easy, to stifle in its beginning, but which can only gain in intensity in proportion as it spreads.”⁷ With respect to terrorism—and in particular terrorism inspired or sustained by religious extremism—no society is more painfully attuned to its destabilizing effects than is Lebanon. Having felt its debilitating sting, Lebanese officials as far back as the 1980s tried to warn the world what would transpire if the problem was not dealt with immediately, and on a multilateral basis. For example, during a state visit to Britain in December 1983, I spoke about the threat of terrorism in these terms:

The fire of the ordeal that has touched the people of Lebanon will very soon, if unchecked, spread throughout the Arab world and the Middle East....The livelihood and the existence of the European nations will in turn become threatened, resulting in a wider conflict, unless something is done now to avert the danger. Taking small risks today obviates the need for greater risks to be taken tomorrow.⁸

Metternich’s sound prescription in favor of early intervention against violent religious extremism was perhaps unknown, and certainly unheeded, by Western, and especially American, decision makers when they stood by seemingly paralyzed as the Islamic State emerged, rapidly gained traction, and then rocketed across vast tracts of Syria and Iraq. Still ensconced in a strategic core area as of this writing, although it has lost some important territories, a range of strategies must be deployed to contain and ultimately defeat ISIS.

Containing and Defeating the Barbarians

⁷ See Mack Walker, ed., *Metternich’s Europe* (New York: Walker and Company, 1968), 44.

⁸ This excerpt, as well the full text of the statement, can be found in Amine Gemayel, *Peace and Unity: Major Speeches, 1982-1984* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1985), 149-163 (quotation on p. 154).

To check the further expansion of the Islamic State, and then to uproot it from its core territories and thereby reduce its ideological appeal and operational reach, an international military response—including a leading role by armed forces of moderate Arabs governments—is of course essential. In recognition of this fact, the Vatican’s representative in Geneva issued an extraordinary call in March 2015 for the creation of a UN-approved multilateral force to stop ISIS genocide—that is the word he used—against Christians and others.⁹ And yet, although in the short-term overt military force and associated secret intelligence operations and covert actions must be employed against ISIS and its affiliates, I submit that over the long-term the opponents of barbarism cannot rely exclusively, or even primarily, on the blunt instrument of organized violence. Instead, political and thought leaders of the liberal world need to formulate and implement strategic plans rooted in and incorporating broader and, therefore, more powerful approaches.

In the fight against barbarism and in defense of civilization, the wisdom of two extraordinary scholar-diplomats of the last century should be heeded. In 1950, as the Cold War pattern of two opposing, militarized blocs was consolidated across the globe, Lebanon’s Charles Malik lamented that “the Western world does not believe strongly enough in the importance and power of ideas.”¹⁰ Less than a decade later, Malik’s contemporary and fellow polymath—the Spanish exile Salvador de Madariaga—wrote: “The cold war is a struggle where moral forces predominate, while the hot war is a struggle where physical forces pre-dominate; and the two Western Powers [Britain and the United States] put much less faith in moral than in physical forces.”¹¹

For his part, U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower, one of the leading strategic minds of the twentieth century, would surely have agreed with Malik and de Madariaga regarding the importance of ideas and moral forces. Eisenhower did not believe that military power was an engine of change; rather, he thought that the value of military strength was limited to preserving the status quo. In a May 1957 speech Eisenhower counseled that the great task of waging peace was “a mission that military formations cannot, of themselves, accomplish,” and he continued,

⁹ John L. Allen Jr., “Vatican Backs Military Force to Stop ISIS ‘Genocide,’” Crux website, 13 March 2015 (<http://www.cruxnow.com/church/2015/03/13/vatican-backs-military-force-to-stop-isis-genocide/>; accessed 14 March 2015). The first paragraphs of the story run as follows:

“In an unusually blunt endorsement of military action, the Vatican’s top diplomat at the United Nations in Geneva has called for a coordinated international force to stop the ‘so-called Islamic State’ in Syria and Iraq from further assaults on Christians and other minority groups.

“‘We have to stop this kind of genocide,’ said Italian Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, the Vatican’s representative in Geneva. ‘Otherwise we’ll be crying out in the future about why we didn’t do something, why we allowed such a terrible tragedy to happen.’”

¹⁰ Malik, “The Problem of Asia,” 36.

¹¹ Salvador de Madariaga, *The Blowing Up of the Parthenon; or, How to Lose the Cold War*, rev. ed. (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1961), 63.

The entire free world military force merely puts a policeman on the corner to keep the robber out of our house and out of our neighborhood. It preserves from destruction what we already have.¹²

Consciously or not, Eisenhower's conviction about the limits of military power reflected the thinking of Malik and de Madariaga, and even more the British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, who wrote:

War can protect; it cannot create. Indeed, war adds to the brutality that frustrates creation.¹³

Unfortunately, the wise advices summarized in the preceding passages have not significantly influenced, much less governed, the liberal world's responses to the immediate challenge posed by ISIS or to those underlying conditions that allowed the Islamic State to burgeon. For this reason, for several years now I have advocated a comprehensive reform program called the "Arab Marshall Plan."

The Arab Marshall Plan

The Arab Marshall Plan is not a detailed blueprint with specified funding levels, metrics, and timetables. Instead, this Plan in the first instance evokes the spirit and name of a historically successful initiative to highlight a key parallel between post-World War II Europe and today's Middle East: namely, the specter of extremism haunting the scene and the consequent need to stimulate a countervailing force of and for moderation. In Europe seventy years ago, the main threat was a political extremism named Communism centered in the Soviet Union; in the Middle East, the chief menace is religious extremism called terrorism based in the territories controlled by the Islamic State. In line with the pattern established by its distinguished predecessor, a program such as the Arab Marshall Plan could counter extremism by activating a set of interlocking measures, including what can be called "inspirational moderation," physical reconstruction and economic development, and new systems of governance, both domestically and on the level of regional cooperation.

Amid a destabilized and destabilizing Middle East, inspirational moderation is vital because it can help move Arab societies to embrace democratic thinking as a prelude to democratic governance. Economic development is essential because it is difficult for people to embrace human rights if they lack jobs, opportunities, and essential services like electricity, education, and healthcare. And new systems of governance are necessary because, in the words of UN Secretary General Ban Ki-

¹² Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Cost of Their Government," 14 May 1957 (available at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=11036&st=&st1=>]; accessed 1 December 2015).

¹³ Quoted in A. H. Johnson, "The Wit and Wisdom of Whitehead," *Philosophy of Science* 13 (July 1946), 237.

moon, “[m]issiles may kill terrorists, but good governance kills terrorism.”¹⁴ The bedrock themes of the Arab Marshall Plan—like that of the original Marshall Plan—would be true partnership and deep cooperation; in the present case, between the international democratic community and the Arab democratic community, a battered but still resilient force for change.

Based on my decades-long knowledge and experience of the Arab world, I am convinced that only a program like the Arab Marshall Plan can save the Arab world from the consequences of failed states and the Islamic State by helping to construct a viable alternative: “citizen-states.” In a citizen-state, the following elements broadly apply: the wellbeing of the individual is paramount; politics and religion are separated; executive governance is transparent, respectful of dissent and media scrutiny, and accountable to parliamentary oversight; elections at all levels are free and competitive; the judiciary is independent; and pluralism flourishes in the form of gender equality, religious tolerance, autonomous civil society, and cultural expression.

The path toward citizen-states is marked, in my view, by three major initiatives appealing, especially, to the youth:

- 1) Educational improvements and the introduction of the latest information technology;
- 2) New media as partners in democratization;
- 3) Socio-economic development.

The first and essential step to founding citizen-states in the Arab world is providing high quality, progressive education to very young boys and, especially, girls. More than any quantity of missiles, bombs, or “boots on the ground” such an approach will help neutralize extremism and promote pluralism. Too frequently Arab children either receive no schooling whatsoever or are placed in religious “schools” operated by clerics whose only credentials are a putative ability to quote the Qur’an chapter and verse and a commitment to propagating an extreme interpretation of religion, including visions of martyrdom via suicide attacks. At the level of high school and university, it is necessary to give Arab youth tangible proof that their lives are improving and will continue to do so after they graduate. In this regard it must be remembered that the Arab Awakening was at heart a movement by the young in favor of change and against a present filled with despair and a future without hope. To inspire Arab youth to support universal values of freedom and democracy, access to higher education must be enhanced, especially in those countries where educational systems have all but collapsed. Above all, new curricula at all educational levels must emphasize the teaching of tolerance, togetherness, and pluralism.

In the new age of Arab citizen-states—if such is to arise—information and information technology will be as important as education in promoting and

¹⁴ See Peter Baker, “Obama Calls for Expansion of Human Rights to Combat Extremism,” *New York Times*, 19 February 2015 ([<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/20/world/obama-extremism-summit.html>]; accessed 20 February 2015).

institutionalizing democratic empowerment. In a global age with instant worldwide communications, the international community must play its part in this process. In this way, the new media will continue to engage students and youth and provide them with the means of enhancing their knowledge and exploiting it for personal and societal improvement. The new Arab media must become partners in the creation of Arab citizen-states. The new media—along with education reform—are the best means to promote hope and the ideas, principles, and values of pluralism. Therefore, international agencies affiliated with the United Nations—as well as private sector NGOs—should help train Arab media not only in technical skills, but also in the norms of democracy.

Historical experience demonstrates that socio-economic deprivation and poverty lead to extremism, which in the Middle East often means religious fundamentalism. The new approach that could be championed by Arab reformers—most importantly the educated classes—must focus on sharing the benefits of economic development as widely as possible across society. Otherwise, continuing economic hardship will surely remain a source of national, regional, and even global instability.

Long before the rise of ISIS, the failures of Arab governance were legion, and can partially be summarized as narrow and unaccountable leadership; undue influence and even outright domination by military, police, and security forces; glaring economic inequality; stifling administrative and bureaucratic systems; cultural and educational dysfunction; lack of social and formal justice mechanisms; and indifference to the delivery of basic services such as medical care and utilities. These factors hindered the emergence of an intellectual vanguard or civil society leaders of the kind that could move Arab states and societies toward meaningful reform.

In recent years, when state authority buckled or collapsed under the pressures of Arab Spring protests, Islamist movements were an existing, and therefore seemingly viable, alternative governing cadre. Too often, however, the Islamists were politically authoritarian, culturally intolerant, and prone to inflicting violent repression on their opponents. Almost everywhere in the Arab world, popular demands for meaningful and democratic participation by citizens in governance have been hampered and even reversed. Furthermore, across the Arab world problems like poverty, corruption, lack of education, and inadequate healthcare have only worsened under the weight of the ongoing wars in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and most recently Yemen. This has led, inevitably, to an intensification of religiously inspired terrorism, fanaticism, and extremism.

A Concert of Religions

In the Middle East religion is often an accelerator, and sometimes a driver, of strife. To counter this destructive pattern, proponents of conflict resolution—which is to say opponents of barbarism—must employ religious teachings and rhetoric to build peace. If the barbarians were allowed to monopolize the religious sphere, then both peace and civilization would suffer a grievous defeat. The organic, functional link between religion and peace was recognized by the founding father of the United

Nations, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, when he delivered his famous “Four Freedoms” address on world order. Roosevelt’s prescriptions included freedom of speech, freedom from want, freedom from fear, and the “freedom of every person to worship God in his own way—everywhere in the world.”¹⁵

Unfortunately, seventy-five years after Roosevelt delivered his seminal address and seventy years after the founding of the UN, even the most casual observer of the Middle East scene will grasp that—with few exceptions—the Four Freedoms are everywhere in retreat in the region. Every dark victory by the Islamic State and other bloody-minded barbarians is a defeat for civilization in general and for basic human decency and religious pluralism in particular. Amid such dire circumstances, what can be done?

In the nineteenth century, Metternich championed an approach to international cooperation that came to be called the Concert of Europe. Basically, the Concert system was an informal consortium of leading powers that worked to resolve international disagreements and quarrels by means of diplomacy rather than war. Arguably, the Concert was the precursor of formal multinational mechanisms like the League of Nations and the United Nations. In today’s environment, an important step for containing and eventually defeating the barbarians could be the creation of a “Concert of Religions” empowered to lead multinational, multi-faith efforts in support of religious pluralism in the Middle East and globally. The proposed Concert of Religions could, like its European predecessor, someday lead to the founding of more formal machinery—perhaps even a “spiritual United Nations.”

The proposed Concert of Religions could constitute itself by bringing together leaders of the various faiths for a spiritual summit. Having been sanctioned and blessed at the leadership level, the Concert of Religions could then serve a permanent “general staff” promoting joint efforts among religious authorities, government officials, and representatives of multilateral organizations. To work with an organization such as the Concert of Religions, most countries would need to retrain and reassign members of their diplomatic corps to familiarize them with matters of religion and faith.

To have a positive effect, a surge of diplomacy on behalf of endangered religious communities—including Arab Christians—would need to be adroit diplomacy, which would necessitate working in tandem with diplomats and religious and political leaders of majority-Muslim countries. The UN high commissioner for human rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein—who is Muslim and a member of the Jordanian royal family—has provided a model for the kind of diplomatic leadership needed at this time. Most significantly, High Commissioner Al Hussein has strongly condemned ISIS by invoking widely accepted Muslim teachings.

¹⁵ The full text of Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms speech can be found at [<http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/pdfs/fftext.pdf>] (accessed 1 December 2015).

Other leading Muslim authorities—including His Royal Highness King Salman of Saudi Arabia, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt, Grand Imam Ahmed al-Tayyeb of Egypt’s Al-Azhar University, former Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri, and Beirut’s Grand Imam Abdel Latif Derian—have spoken out against religious extremism and the persecution of non-Muslims. Among the prominent declarations that Muslim authorities have issued in support of non-Muslims, the following statements particularly gratified me. In late 2013 His Royal Highness King Abdullah II of Jordan asserted:

The protection of the rights of Christians is a duty rather than a favor. Christians have always played a key role in building our societies and defending our nations.¹⁶

And in September of 2014—following the lightening rise of ISIS and its reign of terror—the rector of the largest mosque in Paris, Dalil Boubakeur, said: “We are all, no matter our religion, Christians of the Middle East.”¹⁷

The strong and courageous Muslim voices that have spoken against religiously justified persecutions and in favor of religious pluralism are the true adherents of Islam and the genuine advocates of Islamic civilization. Their efforts might have added potency if issued under the auspices of a multi-faith organization such as the proposed Concert of Religions. Of particular value at this time of proliferating crises and rising intolerance in the Middle East would be a joint statement on the importance of interfaith coexistence and harmony to be read out simultaneously in mosques, churches, and synagogues throughout the region. Perhaps an existing institution could take the lead in drafting such a statement, feasibly the King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (founded by the late king of Saudi Arabia in 2011). Advantageously, the Centre is located in Vienna, one of the world’s leading venues of diplomacy and international relations.

The Concert of Religions could also form standing research and advocacy groups tasked with collecting information on threats to religious pluralism and disseminating relevant policy options to the United Nations, regional organizations such as the Arab League and European Union, and national governments. Finally, the Concert of Religions would need to do everything possible support the remaining patches of pluralism that remain in the Middle East, including my own country of Lebanon. Within a regional and even a global context, Lebanon is central to religious pluralism because it is both a symbolic and applied center of interfaith dialogue and coexistence.

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¹⁶ See Christa Case Bryant, “What the Middle East Would Be Like Without Christians,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 22 December 2013 ([<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2013/1222/What-the-Middle-East-would-be-like-without-Christians>]; accessed 23 January 2014).

¹⁷ See Associated Press, “French Imams to Use Pulpit Against ISIS,” *The Daily Star*, 9 September 2014 (available from [www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2014/Sep-09/270082-french-imams-to-use-pulpit-against-isis.ashx#axzz3Cqd2CecZ]; accessed 9 September 2014).

I began this essay by referencing the world crisis centered on the Middle East but not bounded by its frontiers. The major dimensions of this crisis from an Arab perspective can be encapsulated as a proliferation of failed states (including Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen), the rise of a so-called Islamic State lording over immense areas of Syria and Iraq, the spread of ISIS influence throughout the Mideast and globally, and heavy handed, often destabilizing politico-military interventions by non-Arab powers in Arab domestic and international affairs. Without minimizing the scope or intensity of the challenges ahead, I nevertheless will conclude by articulating a case for cautious optimism.

I am convinced that the Arab and Islamic worlds can achieve the modernization they require, particularly in the educational and political (governance) spheres. Lebanon and Tunisia—the first an established if troubled citizen-state (as defined earlier in this essay), and the second an emerging citizen-state—each in its own way provides grounds for hope. Tunisian President Habib Bourguiba, who held office for three decades starting in 1957, infused his country with a kind of pragmatic, progressive spirit that has helped keep Tunisian society attuned to the necessity for, and dictates of, moderation and change. Tunisian society, even when it suffered from a deficit of political democracy (especially with respect to the rotation of leaders at the top), nevertheless embraced educational reforms that allowed schools and universities to flourish. Gender equality, another prerequisite of modern development, was at the center of the Tunisian national agenda. And finally, Tunisia's maintained a vibrant civil society, including influential labor unions. These structural factors enabled Tunisia to emerge as the major success story of the Arab Spring.¹⁸

Lebanon, like post-Arab Spring Tunisia, can be designated as a citizen-state, although one long subject to siege-like conditions. A decade ago, the country was recovering materially, psychologically, and spiritually from a cycle of internal conflicts largely fueled by external forces. Then came another devastating war with Israel. Subsequently, and continuing to this day, Lebanon absorbed successive shock waves, including massive refugee flows, from the Syrian conflict. Yet Lebanon soldiers on as a concept of tolerance and an idea of democracy. This carries wider Middle East significance in that Lebanon is the only Arab state founded on the principle of all-sectarian inclusion and conciliation. If this formula works in Lebanon—and can be seen to be working across the Arab world—then it could be applied in other Arab post-conflict situations.

For those who doubt that Lebanon was, or can again be, a true citizen-state, a powerful rejoinder is found in the record of the 2005 Cedar Revolution—an event, it must be remembered, that foreshadowed the Arab Spring and pre-dated it by several years. Reflecting on the significance of the Cedar Revolution, a multi-faith movement in

¹⁸ During Tunisia's Arab Spring transition the country's strong civil society provided an essential counterweight to the influence of Islamists, a situation that created the need and political space for mutual compromise.

favor of democracy and freedom and against foreign occupation and domination, a veteran British journalist wrote at the time:

Never before have we seen anything like it in Lebanon. Never before have we seen anything like it in the Arab world....It was an insurrection by the people against the lies and corruption of government as well as the foreign control they have lived under for so many decades.¹⁹

If Lebanon and Tunisia provide solid, if tempered, reasons for optimism about the future of the Arab world, then two other factors also merit brief mention: a changed technological context and transformed minds. In the nineteenth century, the technical harbingers of both economic and political change were factory chimneys, railroad tracks, and telegraph wires. These innovations transformed societies and individuals, but the broad masses were impacted by them rather than exercising significant control over them. In contrast, twenty-first century technology, represented by the hand-held communication device, is symbolically and literally within the grasp of a vast array of individuals, who use them on a daily basis for all manner of purposes, including resistance to government control and repression. As the Arab Spring demonstrated, Arab youth are savvy users of Information Technology, suggesting that personal initiative and along with it personal liberties will triumph.

Regarding changed minds, I am firmly convinced that Arab young people, in particular, will not be diverted from their quest for personal and societal progress by stratagems of paralysis engineered by governments that have no future. Sixty-five years ago, Charles Malik observed that “[p]eoples write history insofar as they participate in the emancipation of man.”²⁰ Today, the Arab peoples are not only ready but also determined to write their own history through self-emancipation. This spirit—now widely entrenched in Arab minds—was captured in a poignant reflection penned by the Russian democratic activist Peter Kakhovksy (1797-1826) shortly before his execution by Czarist authorities:

The people have conceived a sacred truth—that they do not exist for governments, but that governments must be organized for them. This is the cause of struggle in all countries; peoples, after tasting the sweetness of enlightenment and freedom, strive toward them; and government, surrounded by millions of bayonets, make efforts to repel these peoples back into the darkness of ignorance. But all these efforts will prove in vain; impressions once received can never be erased. Liberty, that torch of intellect and warmth of life, was always and everywhere the attribute of peoples emerged from primitive ignorance. We are unable to live like our ancestors, like barbarians or slaves.²¹

¹⁹ Robert Fisk, “Cry Goes Out for Freedom in Beirut’s Martyrs’ Square,” *The Independent*, 15 March 2005, p. 24.

²⁰ Malik, “The Problem of Asia,” 16.

²¹ See Walker, ed., *Metternich’s Europe*, 148.

Kakhovksy's message resonates across the ages, speaking as it does for Arabs struggling to attain their place in the modern world and also for all of those determined not to wait passively for the barbarians

The liberal world's most powerful tool in the civilizational struggle it faces is one that readers of this journal believe in passionately; in the words of the Arab author Kamel Daoud, "l'humanisme [est] la seule chose qui pourrait tous nous sauver."²² And so in the wake of a twentieth century whose history was warped and nearly derailed by Communism, Fascism, Nazism, and other murderous movements, let us reject the barbarian exclusivism of ISIS and their kind by upholding the only sustainable and universal "ism"—humanism—a pursuit in which the Arabs are unsurpassed.

[End]

²² Kamel Daoud, "Daech en guerre contre Noël," *New York Times*, 1 January 2016 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/02/opinion/daech-en-guerre-contre-noel.html>]; accessed 1 January 2016).