

This is the text of an interview conducted with Syrian author, translator, and physician Rateb Shabo. Shabo has published opinion pieces in the areas of politics and political Islam in a number of newspapers. On the background of his activism in the Communist Labor Party, he spent around sixteen years (1983-1999) in imprisonment, the last three years in Tadmur Military Prison. Some of the works he translated include: "Unveiling Islam" by Roger Du Pasquier, and the novel "Train to Pakistan" by Khushwant Singh. In 2013 Dar Sharq wa Gharb, Damascus, published Shabo's book "The World of the First Islam" which studies the political aspects of the character of Prophet Mohammad. His novel "Behind these Walls" in which he describes his long experience in Syria's prisons was awarded the Damascus Price for Diarists in 2013.

"Dar'a! What did we need this frenzy for?" said the Syrians in their habitual sarcastic way after they experienced the extent of death and destruction that came over them as punishment for the adventure of disobeying the ruler. They learned that there is a system that is prepared to burn down the country, and a world that is ready to count the victims and to update, in the course of time, the checks and balances for the costs of Syria's reconstruction. For Syrians, "time" has become tantamount in meaning to further bloodshed and destruction.

Syrians who took to the streets of cities and towns in demand for their freedom, astonishing the world with their courage and willingness to sacrifice, live today in refugee camps and areas of displacement. The streets are now home to snipers and bandits, and the ugliest sort of wars is being waged. "The lesson to be learned by the Syria of tomorrow, which will emerge from this load of pain, from the Syria today is that remaining silent over the unjust detention or killing of any individual is nothing but a step on a path that leads to the arrest and murder of a people."

The quote is taken from your article "Requiem for the Living" in which you refer to the Syrians living in misery, living in displacement. In it you ask what lesson the future Syria is to learn from the current Syria, which is presently in a state of divide, chaos, extremism, oppression, poverty, and displacement. In Lebanon and Iraq the past has still not found closure, and the present is characterized by war.

The Syrian revolution has turned into a tragedy. The Syrian regime went for broke crushing the Syrian will for and dream of freedom. It can't get any worse than where we stand today. Young Syrians who had taken part in the demonstrations – which had been marvellous and audacious simply for being defiant and vigorous – and who had jumped [to chants] with all the energy they had, as if this way freedom would come sooner, are the same young people who today have been forcefully disappeared in secret prisons, or who have found no other way out but to cross the sea in quest for a safe haven. Some have drowned, while others have made it, only to become helpless refugees branded with humiliation. This alone is tragic, but it does not encompass the whole scope of the Syrian catastrophe. What is worse is what must have happened to the hearts of those young people that had once beaten with a will to drive change and a love for life, but that are now filled with feelings of despair, injustice, withdrawn protection, and spite. Love unites, while spite divides and destroys. What also needs to be mentioned is the enormity of the destruction that will leave Syria crouching under the weight of reconstruction debts for many decades to come.

If Syria emerges united from this spiritual and material destruction, it will still have to overcome many political and cultural challenges before it may become a country that embraces its people. I,

for my part, bear a deep fear over the unity of Syria. I wonder whether the Syria as we knew it will be able to heal and become again one country. I do hope that time will prove my fears wrong. I think that since the time Syria was born, it has never witnessed such a sectarian polarization as it does today. I don't think that the force of mutual rejection between Syrians has ever been this strong. It does not matter now why we have reached this point, why events have taken this turn. What matters is the extremely dark reality we are facing now. The situation today is much worse than it was before the revolution began. Then, there had still been hope for a revolution to happen, and there had been a specific enemy. Despite its greatness, it is clear today that the revolution has been corrupted, that devastation has become the norm, and that we are now left without hope. The force that moved the Syrian people forward was crushed, and it became evident that this people does not have any friends. Syrians today react to evil with even greater evil; they escape from scorching heat to fire. The idea of revolution arouses rejection in the minds of the general public since people saw how things have turned out for them, and how other mighty revolutions have ended back at square one. As if the powers of injustice and darkness had decided that the Arab revolutions shall be a lesson on desperation. None of the Arab Spring countries is better off today than it was four years ago when this "spring" first erupted. The forces that oppose the revolutions are more advanced, compared to the pro-revolutionary forces, in terms of the methods, knowledge, and tools used. This became clear through the experience of the Arab Spring.

The Syrian revolution and its consequences constitute not only a lesson for the Syria of tomorrow but for the entire world. Condoning the rule of a dictator comes at a horrendous price, and it may even introduce drastic changes to the existence of nations (Europe has lived the experience of being lenient with an aggressor and paid a tremendous price in World War II; what applies at an international level also applies at the internal domestic level of a country). All that is built at the expense of the dignity of a people and its humanity is a false construct that will inevitably vanish.

In Ba'thist Syria, the entire country was turned into one prison. You too were imprisoned, and after your release you were not allowed to leave the country. Syria is still not free, not even partially, and with this destructive war, "freedom" in Syria has become synonymous to a life in Diaspora. As a physician who wrote about his experience of imprisonment, could you share with us your view on how this "prison-country" is constructed around a system of surveillance and punishment, and why it is that there is such a big number of executioners who are ready to lash their society.

I was twenty years and five days old when I was arrested by the Syrian security apparatus. During the investigation I was astonished to learn that they had been recording information on me since I had been in the 7th grade (13 years old). They did this not only with me, but with others too. As if to hint at my pro-oppositionist political inclination, the investigator said to me: "You refused to join the Revolutionary Youth Union" (which is the youth organization of the Arab Socialist Ba'th Party in Syria). This is true. When one day a party official entered our classroom and registered our names saying that we now were youth unionists, a childish feeling of freedom made me ask him to take my name off his list. Even this detail of my life had been registered. Following that incident, five years later, when I was in my final school year (the Syrian Baccalaureate), my school principal gathered a group of "best" students. He lectured us on the danger emanating from the Islamic Brotherhood gangs, which to him were advocates of regression and imperialism. Then he asked us to get

prepared to assume the tasks of guarding the headquarters of both the Ba'ath party and the Revolutionary Youth Union in Latakia. He also wanted us to get ready to break the strike of the Latakian merchants by breaking open the doors of their stores so as to force them to open against their will. At the end of his lecture he said confidently: "I believe everybody is ready to carry out these tasks, right?" He was surprised when I refused telling him that my parents had rented an apartment for me in the city to be able to study, and not to guard any headquarter, or to break open doors. "As you wish," he said, and escorted me out of the room where he then told me to "think about it" because I might "regret it". When I enrolled in the faculty of medicine at the University of Damascus, a recommendation made by the security apparatus had already reached there before me. But this only dawned on me later. I was forbidden to live on the university campus, although it should have been a given because I came from another governorate, was enrolled in a faculty of science, and also because I was one of the three students with the highest grades in our respective home governorate (after excluding my grades in religion class). I spent days in following up on this matter and awaited that the promises made to solve this issue would be fulfilled. It never occurred to me in my childish imagination that a recommendation had been circulated based on which I were to be deprived of any aspect that could have made my life as a student easier. Despite everything they did to make me "regret", the feelings of rejection and absolute aversion towards this authority, which makes use of any means and resources at its disposal to subdue its people, only grew stronger.

The problem in our country is that, in the course of our history, the authorities have been bestowed with certain sacredness. This obstructs the emergence of a balanced equation between the ruler and the ruled. Note how political Islam, in all its forms, paves the way for breaking with the Establishment by disconnecting it first from its presumed sacral ties with the celestial. In other words, political Islam apostatizes the Establishment and then calls for the building of a sacral authority to which people are subjected (some may argue that political Islam does not call for such an authority, but this is only a weak argument since Islamic Sharia – the interpretation of which is without any doubt human and dependent on the side that undertakes the interpretation – derives its force from it being the words and will of Allah). Sayyid Qutb's prescription for society, or what he calls the "Islamic Solution", is "a just government with obedient subjects". How can the government be "just" if the people it rules are requested to be obedient? The Islamic opposition, which unfortunately constitutes the broadest opposition, tells people to disobey this or that authority, but "obey us." In conclusion, political Islam understands "opposition" as the effort that is undertaken to exchange one authority with another, and both demand obedience. When a people merely obeys, it is turned into a human bulk, or subjects, that lack all characteristics of a people. Obedience of a ruler is an intrinsic element in our common culture. Obedience makes persons – even civilians who have neither formal, nor informal ties with the repressive state apparatuses – ready to repress any objections. I know of true stories that took place in the governorate of al-Hasaka (not in the coastal region, so as to avoid any prejudgements of these stories) where poor persons armed themselves with sticks and then voluntarily attempted to disperse the demonstrations there.

The issue of sectarianism is not new to the Levant. Lebanon and Iraq, with their sectarian and religious wars, have beaten Syria to the headlines. What becomes clear from the existence of tens of

thousands of sectarian militias, which are driven by religious prophecies, is that sectarianism is currently the most important driver of conflict. Combating sides do not feel shame for making their interest in finding solutions to end the conflict conditional on the insurance that they will have a majority in the rule of the disintegrated geographic entities. You grew up within the milieu of a minority group that is accused of having ruled Syria with a fist of iron and fire. This minority group is now to pay the price for what it has and still is committing against the Sunni majority group – so is the demand that is being circulated in a big number of online videos which call for punishment based on sectarian affiliation. What is your analysis of the sectarian conflict in the region?

You make an important point in your question. The parties at war with one another do not shy back from manifesting their existence within the divided entities only when they possess the majority in the ruling local authority. Only those who are in majority and in control are the ones who speak of peace and the necessity for stability, picturing life as if it were to be as sweet as honey. The same applies to the Syrian regime that speaks about the nation, brotherhood, and national unity, while at the same time it practices, under the surface, all forms of discrimination that ensure its self-preservation even beyond “Allah, his angels and judgement day”.

Sectarian conflicts, anywhere, need a dynamo that continuously fuels them. There is no doubt that this driving force is political in nature. When discrimination is practiced based on the confession or sect a person is born into, it is only natural that one will cultivate a feeling of sectarian belonging. The more agonizing and broader this discrimination on a sectarian basis is carried out, the greater will be the spread and strength of this “sectarian” feeling. The opposite holds true. When a state is capable of imposing a national law that is implemented regardless of secondary affiliations, then national belonging will naturally be a common feeling. Our “nationalist” states, however, are incapable of doing so because discrimination and corruption are the means the ruling authorities use to ensure their stay in power.

In our countries, the sectarian dynamo has two engines. The first engine is run by the ruling authority through its practice of sectarian discrimination, while maintaining, in parallel, a discourse of national unity. This leads people to feel more strongly about their sectarian affiliation and vilify national sense. Islamic political organizations run the second engine of the sectarian dynamo. These organizations are by definition sectarian. Secular streams do not possess the necessary strength to preserve their independence, and so they bias with either the Establishment, or with political Islam under dull political and ideological pretexts. This situation aggravates the issue of sectarianism; the way out of this chasm seems to be difficult and long.

The feature of sectarianism dominates the conflict in Syria today. Shiite organizations and states are in confrontation with Sunni states. It is self-evident that this is not a Sunni-Shiite conflict in which the goal is to support either doctrine to dominate over the other. Rather, it is a conflict over local, regional and global power. The United States, France, and Australia are involved in this conflict without being part of this Sunni-Shiite polarization. There are Sunni states that became active in the combat against the Sunni Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). These are obvious facts. The Syrian regime is looking for those who are willing to protect its existence and continuation – hence the Iranian axis which includes Iran, [the Lebanese] Hizbollah and Iraq. Were Turkey to support the Syrian regime, then it would have placed itself under the Turkish backing.

Didn't the Syrian regime previously resort to Turkey in seek of support for finding a solution to Syria's problems with Israel and Europe? The conflict in its essence is not a sectarian conflict at all. But the Sunni versus Shiite alignment leaves a strong imprint, and it pushes the true aspiration of the Syrian revolution (this aspiration has been neutralized a long time ago) into absentia. Combatants today speak of their fight against an Alawite regime, not a dictatorship. The blood spill and the feeling of helplessness push both conflicting sides (one specific religious doctrine dominates on each side) into a state of further paralysis and extremism against one another, or in other words to more sectarianism.

The rise of Islamist forces in the region is accompanied by a trend of manifesting a notion that revolves around the protection of minority groups. The Left stands incapable of bringing forward any serious ideas or visions. It only calls for ending the war, and it aligns itself with one of the conflicting parties under mainly weak pretexts. It is true that the Left as a concept faces difficulties in penetrating the current system. The Left in the Levant has its special historic path which may have cross-cutting, contradictory or diverging elements with the Left in other parts of the world. Yet it [the Left in our region] remains the most incapable worldwide of developing a project and a vision for the occurring events. Leftist forces make do with the use of demagogic terminology and catch-phrases that are taken from outdated dictionaries, without undertaking any real investigative effort that would be conducive to improving their political performance.

Why is it in your opinion that this incapability and lethargy prevails among the Left in our region? Given the current situation, what could be done, in your opinion, to reach a modern phase for leftist political work?

I understand the "Left" as a "science-oriented" bias towards peoples, as opposed to populism, which is the art of gaining popularity. The difference between the two is essential. To realize as a political party, political stream, or even as an intellectual what it is that constitutes the interest of a people, and to work towards achieving it means to truly seek the knowledge and to turn that set of interests into a political concern. This is different from entertaining the mood of masses and delivering speeches that aim at attracting a popular base. Then, the political concern would be that of becoming popular. One might access power this way, but it would eventually lead the people into a state of frustration. During the Syrian revolution, the Syrian Left had followed a policy that was a sterile mix of placing its bets on the exterior and on populism. In other words, the Syrian Left subjected itself to the actions and politics of external forces and to the moods of the masses, instead of rising as a self-defined actor.

A specificity that the Left in the Middle East needs to deal with is the very tight connection between the two levels of the national (primarily the Palestinian cause) and the social (dictatorships, huge income discrepancies, exploitation, unemployment, etc.). In the post World War II period, with the increased might of the Soviet Union and the beginning of the Cold War, the Left in general became burdened by the political weight and the politics of the USSR. The burden manifested itself partially in the dull interaction between the Left and society in all social issues for which the USSR's body of thoughts delivered ready recipes that were disconnected from local realities. This also applied to matters of national interest on which the USSR did not take any stance of principle, but rather took stances that served balances and compromises in its own interest. The Left had to either accept

these political positions of the USSR, or deal with the consequences of going into opposition; neither choice was in the interest of the Left.

The political weight of the USSR was a cause for both the absence of a deep-rooted leftist movement and the isolation of any creativity within Arab leftist thought. The Soviet Union's concept and politics ensured that any dissension was curtailed and cut-off. During the "era of stagnation" under Brezhnev's rule and the following disintegration and dissolution of the USSR, the Left witnessed a regression because it lost its ally, and also because of the decline of the leftist doctrine that came hand in hand with the waning of the communist expansion. There was no escape from this development. Every leftist group (even if not communist) was considered a protégé of the Soviet Union, even if the latter had given the dictatorships green light to suppress or eliminate any one of these groups.

When the Arab Spring erupted in demand of democracy, the Left did not qualify for a leadership role. Democracy was not part of the leftist thought structure, which was rather absolutist in its nature. The same, of course, applies to right-wing Islamist political thought. It is, therefore, that the political expressions of the Arab revolutions emerged from outside the spectrum of previously existing political parties and organizations.

In my opinion, the Left should have the courage to stand independently. It shouldn't play its cards to the benefit of the politically strong, as this weakens the Left. So far, its policy of choosing from among the lesser of two evils has brought the Left nothing but more bitterness and weakness. In Syria, the Left lost face when it gave up its independence; part of it associated itself with the regime, another joined the Islamists. I believe that the Left is missing as a force in this ongoing conflict that is carried out between the Right and the extreme Right. In our countries there is a need for serious, scientific and solid criticism of political Islam as the principal obstacle to liberation.

What is your interpretation of the emergence of Jihadist Islamist groups? And how would you explain how these small, oppressed groups were able to penetrate the Syrian society to this large extent? Who are they, and how did they expand and gain control? What is the essence of their politics with regards to Syria? Do you see any future for Jihadist Islamist groups' dominion, now that an international alliance has joined forces to destroy them?

I form my opinion on Jihadist Islamist movements based on my observations of the strange phenomenon of ISIS and others. Salafist Jihadism is the worst expression of Sunni Islam. It is built on highly concise and superficial conceptions that are accompanied by a delirious tendency towards violence. There are various forms of this "mixture", ISIS being the most salient representative with its morally and politically mortifying exhibition of bloodshed. For the rational observer it seems impossible to imagine that this huge military machinery emerged and remained in existence without the support of major powers. At the same time, the might of ISIS is put in the service of a restricted mind that wishes to restore the Caliphate (*Khilafa*), its understanding of which it limits to the presence of a caliph and to the re-establishment of the times of the "rightly guided" caliphs in terms of dress codes, laws, and language. The phenomenon is quite incomprehensible, yet it is audaciously real.

Did ISIS need to become part of the world's destiny? Couldn't the "global system" have stopped this "terror" when it was still at its beginning? Why was this phenomenon left to grow to these proportions and to cause all these disfigurements under the world's watchful eyes? Where does ISIS get its incredible information capabilities from? Endless questions that all lead to one conclusion: There exists a global strategy that wants to see ISIS, and its likes, be the way it is. The purpose is not only to distort and bury the Syrian revolution – this goal is being achieved in the general context of the plan – but rather to paralyze the political effectiveness of Sunni Islam.

Any widespread association with a certain identity constitutes a potential danger to the dominating powers. The pan-Arab nationalist identity was disintegrated and weakened. The British and later the U.S. American interest in Israel was not because of Israel's absolute vassalage to these two powers. Some Arab states today are ready to exceed Israel in its subordination and willingness to serve the U.S. But Israel possesses a quality that none of the Arab countries has, which is that Israel is not an Arab state. In other words, no matter how strong Israel becomes, it will never be a centre that attracts Arabs to join forces. In contrast, an Arab state with sufficient power may be in a position to do so. The investment in Israel was, therefore, a guaranteed investment.

The same can be said about the role Iran plays in the Middle East today. From a U.S. perspective, Iran has two qualities that mainly Saudi Arabia, but also Turkey, don't have: Iran is not an Arab country, and it is not Sunni by religious denomination. This means that the organic composition of Iran is defined via its Persian and Shiite identities. These two identities do not reach in their dimension the alarming magnitude of the Arab and Sunni identities. Based on this it becomes understandable why there is such a global lenience towards the actions of the Houthis of Yemen, and the Lebanese Hezbollah in Syria, etc.

What seems to be expected of ISIS is that it continues on this path that will leave Sunni Islam appear as the source of terrorism and irrationality, and will turn it into the object of sarcasm. This way, the potential energy of this widespread affiliation with the Sunni identity is undermined. I must say at this point that I am against the establishment of any political movement that is based on an affiliation with political Islam, and that I perceive political Islam to be a major obstacle on our way to achieving freedom. It is democracy and integrity that constitute the main components of an optimal solution in the fight against "Sunni" terrorism, and not the creation of organizations that will then necessitate the formation of alliances to combat them.

In my view there is no future for Islamic Jihadism. These movements eventually self-limit themselves because they are politically void, and so they flourish only in phases of conflict. Yet it is this exact quality that makes them easy-to-use instruments for countries in the implementation of long-term strategies.

Based on your experience in Syria, how would you describe the Syria of today at the local, regional and international levels? What is the future Syria going to be like, in your opinion?

Assad the father built his regime on an efficient principle, which was to establish a relationship with the East in a way that served the West. He was clever in striking a balance for Syria in the tug-of-war game between the Soviet Union and the U.S. In my opinion, that is what the U.S. desires from

any Syrian regime. It does not want a regime in Syria which openly displays its allegiance to the U.S., as is the case, e.g., with Jordan, Saudi Arabia, or Egypt. The Syrian people bear a considerable pan-Arab nationalist anxiety, for it has adopted the Palestinian cause as its own. Hence there is a true enmity of the Syrian people to Israel and the U.S. To protect a vassal regime would not benefit the U.S. because such a regime would not endure, and the costs for its maintenance would exceed the scope of the potential services rendered. In Syria, a “functioning” regime would be one that is, on the one hand, “pan-Arab” and “rejectionist” to appease the Syrian popular mood, and on the other hand understands how to not interfere with U.S. politics in the region. This describes the ideal regime for the U.S. in Syria. The Soviets guaranteed the protection of the regime and its uninterrupted maintenance on the basis that Syria was their “ally”. The U.S. imposed, whenever it wanted, whatever it needed on the Syrian regime. The latter then invested its “animosity” towards the U.S. in subduing its people under the heading “the imperialist conspiracy and the vicious attacks on the 'pan-Arab' regime, etc.” The Syrian regime was good at placing its investments in the political playground of the two major powers at that time: It managed to regain al-Qunaytirah through diplomatic means, commit its violation of Lebanon, rearranged the Palestinian political cards, and established a special relationship with the regime of the “Islamic revolution” in Iran, etc.

Today, Assad the son follows in his father’s footsteps whenever the relationship with Russia, the successor of the USSR, is concerned. This is very natural because there has been no change to the regime itself; only a fool would have expected an essential change to occur merely through the hereditary turnover in power from father to son. While then the regime still attempted to absorb the people’s desire for change through gestures it made, such as the inaugural speech, or through the phenomenon of the “Damascus Spring” – which soon after turned into a “winter” – it went back soon after to showing its true nature.

The Syrian revolution caused a dilemma for the regime. Its assets with the U.S. – I mean here the stability and complete internal control – had vanished. The regime’s entire security and military apparatuses (the military was mobilized during the first weeks of the revolution) failed in putting down the Syrian people, despite the world’s initial disregard, and the repeated ultimata the regime was given. The Syrian regime lost its relations with Turkey from which it had hoped that it would open doors to solutions with Europe and Israel, and hence threw itself more into the Iranian and Russian embrace. Still, as usual, the Syrian regime remained mindful of satisfying the U.S. Truly, until today and despite everything, the U.S. has not reached an absolute conviction to give up on Assad. In my view, the U.S. seems to want to replay with Assad the “Saddam scenario”.

Many countries have invested in and placed their bets on the Syrian conflict, which will soon complete its fourth year. It will not be easy to find a settlement that will satisfy all sides. Syria has lost the cornerstone that unified it as a nation. A shift took place by which the state was transformed from a public institution, which managed the permanent unity of the country, to a private institution with an army that is conceived by a big part of the Syrian people as the enemy. There are foreign countries that seek political gain from this conflict, and there is a people that has lost the center that should have unified it as a nation. Could there be any setting that reveals more disintegration than this? In my opinion, Syria today is ready for a divide. But for it to happen, the major powers still need to reach agreement and give their blessings.

One could also imagine that Syria will remain united on a map, but divided internally, in the fashion of Iraq. In any case, I do not find anything that soothes the soul when thinking about Syria, but I do wish that the future will prove my anguish wrong.