



## SAYYID: “THE CONFLICT RIGHT NOW IN THE MIDDLE EAST IS BETWEEN THE POST-WESTERN REGIONAL ORDER AND THE STATUS-QUO.”

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**ORSAM:** First of all, we would like to thank you for accepting our request for an interview. With the Arab Spring, a possibility for a democratic renewal emerged in the Middle East. However, what we witness today is a deepening regional crisis rather than a democratic renewal. How do you define the crisis in the Middle East? Can this crisis be seen as the result of the Western international order? Is it a crisis in the Westphalian order?

**Bobby Salman Sayyid:** I think a number of problems come together here. The Westphalian dream of sovereign nations able to regulate and discipline their populations has been shown to be unsustainable. There are many

reasons for this. My argument is that it has always been unsustainable. People forget that after the Peace of Westphalia, Europe did not become peaceful. From 1648 till 1945 there were a lot of wars. The wars of reformation and counterreformation came to an end. However, that was never a problem in the Muslim lands as it is not the driving force for unrest. In Muslim countries the secularists have been much more violent than the non-secularists. In places like Turkey, Albania and Iraq most of the major violence has been constructed either in silence or in an attempt to create the Westphalian order on the idea of one nation, one land and one religion. It was difficult to do it in Europe and difficult to do it everywhere else as well. I think the Westphalian order was always

a bit of a dream. However, I think that the key to it was the notion of sovereignty. There is a link between the sovereignty and democracy and without sovereignty you cannot have democracy. Without sovereignty you cannot be a proper state.

How many of them are actually states in the classical Weberian sense of being sovereign political entities? Very few. There is an argument being made that if you think that defence was the core of the sovereignty of the state, then France, Britain, and Germany are not sovereign because they depend on the US. Even in the case of countries like France and Britain which have nuclear weapons, we cannot imagine circumstances where they could actually use them without a green light from the USA. So this is the reality of the question of sovereignty in a way. What we have now are the fictions of sovereignty and fictions of democracy. The real thing that we do is that there are some states in some parts of the world and I suppose Turkey and Iran would qualify for this where there is sovereignty in a sense that the people feel that their rulers depend far more on the support of the population than on support from Washington. That has been the change. For example, in Turkey there used to be said until very recently that no matter how many elections you win, the Washington determines what the policy will be. And I think that is still the narrative but the reality has changed. So you

have these possibilities and I think in Egypt what you have with Morsi is a possibility, because we should remember it is not even one year of a state that have become democratic. And if you think of one year, look what they did in relation to Gaza. The isolation of Gaza was ended because they would not be able to enforce it. It made rapprochements with Iran. For thirty years Egypt was completely unable to talk to Iran. There was some near possibility of a sovereign Egypt which had not existed since the time of Nasser to some extent. And I think that is where the real issue is. There is a relationship between the public opinion being a resource and being able to exercise sovereignty. Therefore, in that sense it seems to me the Westphalian order is an illusion. When people point to the economic successes of the East Asian tigers, one of the key things is that the reason why China is successful; because China is so huge, it has been relatively immune. And the difficulty of the [Middle Eastern] region is its fragmentation.

**What kind of fragmentation are you talking about?**

In the region, there are regimes which are completely aligned with Western powers and opposed to the population which has no ability to express themselves. USA would not support a democratic transition in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) any time soon. They

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would rather have the Saudi family ruling rather than the people of the Arabian Peninsula. So what if democracy suddenly happens in Bahrain where the Saudi troops go in? What do the Americans do? When the coup happens against Morsi what do the Americans do? I do not think there is anything more than an angry letter in which they already said “*Do not worry about it*”.

**What do you think about the Middle Eastern regional order in the post-Cold War era?**

I think there were two important things. In the Cold War, there was a specific kind of state that emerged in this region. It is important to identify how international relations and social relations are integrated. International relations tend to focus on the foreign policy and state-state relations without looking at

how the state itself is formed in relationship with other states. I think a particular form of state emerged and their internal security was the key factor in their survival. As a consequence the regimes built infrastructure and institutions which were mainly designed to deal with internal dissent because externally cold war froze national boundaries in this region.

So it is unthinkable that there would be a major transformation of national boundaries with one or two exceptions. Traditionally, when you look at the state formation, the highest and the only duty of the state is to be able to defend itself from others by managing two threats - the external threat and the internal one. During Cold War the jihad became the primary one. States got the resources externally through the Soviet Union or the United States and did not need

to win the support of their people. Therefore, people were actually irrelevant in a way.

And now suddenly we have a situation where the regimes are falling all over the place or are under a threat. Also, if you look at the series of interventions between 1949-1989, you can count them in one hand. How many times the Soviet Union or more likely the America happened to intervene during that time? There is Lebanon and Iran but not much else. Since then there has not been a year when they have not bombed, intervened or threatened to do so.

To explain this, my argument is that the order they constructed was built around the architecture of the Cold War. It required stable boundaries to be fixed and guaranteed by the superpowers. An inability for the boundaries to be guaranteed meant the states suddenly were in a situation of a threat. If you look at Gaza, the Palestinians were able to resist the Israeli attacks because they were able to draw the support of the people of Gaza. In contrast, Iraq or Libya, were unable to resist it because they could not mobilize the support from their people so these regimes became incredibly vulnerable. As they become vulnerable the gap between the rulers and the ruled has increased. They tried to hold on to that and it involved more and more coercion. This, of course, leads to greater distance and loss of legitimacy. I think this is the regime order. For

me, the current crisis in Syria and other places is basically related to this maintaining of the order, maintaining the regimes which are not dependent on their people against regimes which are more organically attached to their people.

**There are different debates on the present order in the Middle East. For example, Richard Haass from the US argues that we can define the crisis in the Middle East with reference to the pre-Westphalian order. On the other hand, Christopher Hill claims that we are at the end of the Arab Middle East. Both of these arguments suggest that we are in a different period when a new order is being established in the Middle East. Taking into consideration these two competing narratives, can we think that a different order conceptualization is taking place in the region?**

I think there is a wider argument about the order. Most of the debate about the order is conducted in geopolitical terms. We need to think about the order in a philosophical category because order is about understanding and classifying things. The philosophical underpinnings of the geopolitical visions are often neglected in both the statecraft and academic analysis. To take the point about the end of the Arab Middle East -it seems to me that there is a fundamental issue about how we understand this region. One of the key factors for

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me is that there is a wider division of how we understand the world, the western societies, cultures and histories and how we understand what is considered to be non-Western. You can easily see it, for example, through the organization of disciplines. We have the discipline of sociology, which is meant to look at the Western society and we have the discipline of anthropology whose the original aim was to look at the Western people. However, the main thing is the relationship of the political. History and politics can be found only in the West. Everywhere else there are either empty cycles of dynasties or sometimes, if they are very cosmopolitan, they will refer themselves to the Khaldoun's theory but

it is something cyclical, there is no historic development. There is no politics. So what is political is treated in terms of ethnicity. So it is easy to talk now that the crisis in the Middle East has to do with the conflict between the Shies and the Sunnis or previously during the Saddam's war the crisis was between the Arabs and the Persians or now the Turks and the Kurds. When you actually look at the way the conflict happens or firstly the historical claims made for the continuity of these conflicts, you do not find that.

**Can you explain it with an example?**

The Ottoman armies in the WWI were in 30% non-Anato-

lian. Even when Turkey was losing, there was no massive desertion from the army along the ethnic lines. And people say “well, the French army...”, the French army started mutinying in 1917. The sense of identification among the Ottoman population was not about being Turkish. At the time there were no such strong feelings. When there was ethnic cleansing in the Balkans, where did these people go? Most of them went to what now is the Republic of Turkey. They did not do so for random reasons. I consider the idea that the Westphalian labels of Turk, Kurd, Arab have existed and meant same thing, absurd. But the Western scholarship and Oriental scholarship which imitates the first one, have tended to focus upon these as realities and build their notions around it. One of the problems that comes up is that most Western statements will say “Arab countries like Iran or Turkey” because for them “Arab” is something completely to do with “Muslim”. Even if the majority of Muslims are not Arabs. So I think that the idea of an Arab Middle East is a part of the idea of this geographical construction through which any order expresses itself or tries to express itself. And as a consequence of what we are talking about there is a shift in the historiography. Yet, the historiography does not actually look at the deep underlying transformations. One could easily imagine different kinds of order of origin if different

decisions had been made. Take for example the Ottoman state. If it had not lost the WWI, you would have a country as it was in 1916 or so with Iraq, parts of Hejaz, Jordan, Palestine, and Syria which would all be a part of one entity. It would not be a Turkish national entity because there would be many groups and it would have to be much more cosmopolitan. I would imagine that the Kurdish problem would not have existed because the Kurds would be a part of this unity. Israel would not have existed either. It would also be a great power able to have at least some presence in the world. I am not saying there would be no problems but they would be different kind of problems. It would have probably been the second or third largest Muslim state in terms of population but certainly in terms of development and the economy it would be the largest one. It would be very difficult to ignore its significance. If it is possible for Europeans to build the EU after 100 years in which they killed 70 million people, there is nothing that prevents that kind of thing [in the Middle East]. What is clear is that the conflict right now is between the post-Western regional order and the status-quo.

**What is post-Western regional order literally?**

The link between the kind of post-Western would be whether the countries in the gulf can sustain themselves without active support

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from external actors. Now, in the short term, the most difficult challenge, it seems to me, is if there was a rapprochement between Turkey and Iran then, I think, a post-Western order could emerge. It would be much more progressive and enabling. It is very easy to say it but the reality is of course much more difficult. However, we can see there is potential of this kind of linkage and coordination that is actually quite progressive.

**Well, what kind of conditions can we talk about for a rapprochement between Iran and Turkey? What can be the role of Western countries in such rapprochement?**

I think the Western countries will play a vital role in prevent-

ing any such a thing. The Western countries are not interested in independent, sovereign states in this region or anywhere else to be honest with you. One of the problems with the ISIS is that the Iraqi military was so weak. The Iraqi military was kept weak through a consequence of certain type of policies of the US. For example, the US did not want to give the Iraqi military heavy weapons in case they may threaten Israel. If you look at the history of the US’ support for regimes and regime building, not just Iraq or Afghanistan but also South Vietnam and Central America, there is a similar problem of massive corruption. This corruption cannot be put down to bad people. It is systemic because a lot of their support is based on buying

the support. As a consequence, they have to allow a certain amount of corruption. The South Vietnamese army disintegrated in the face of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese. Why? There was a reason for this. Someone has to look at this as at a systemic factor. The institutions of Iraq were allowed to be weak. They would blame it on Maliki. Nevertheless, the structure of Iraq was a very weak state because of the policies that they took—some deliberately, some not. As a consequence, what you have now is the construction of warlordism. And it occurs when the state collapses. It happens in Africa, South America, it will happen in Europe, it will happen in Asia. It has happened anywhere where the states have collapsed. You are dealing now with a region in which the states have collapsed and warlordism is more likely to develop. The fact that the ISIS is on its shiny path, is a symptom of a collapsed state. It is calculated that they may have at most fifty thousand fighters, maybe twenty or thirty thousand of them. It is not an army. If they were ever challenged by competent state military, they would not be able to sustain themselves.

**In this context, is ISIS a reason for or a result of the crisis in the Middle East?**

I think it is a consequence of two major problems. One thing is that state collapse makes the ground fertile for warlordism. Secondly,

if you really are interested in why ISIS emerges, you look at the overthrow of Morsi and the “coronation” of Al-Sisi. Al-Sisi is the father of ISIS. And I mean this because by allowing an experiment in a kind of ballot-box by which Islamists may come to power, they have reinforced the impression which the Islamist groups have had at least since Algeria where the same thing happened. The same thing was repeated for example in Palestine when Hamas won the elections and the EU and the US did not recognize it. So in a sense you see that the Islamists and anyone who wants a better order in the region have come to a conclusion that we cannot have it through structured and more or less peaceful means. The dirty secret about the democracy is that the Western countries believe that because they are democratic, they are always on the side of the people throughout the world. They believe this themselves, and they tell everyone to believe this. The experience of Muslims and Africans, Asians and South Americans is the opposite of that. Nearly always the US and other powers have been on the side of governments against the people. And that is what they do not understand because they see that democracy at home means democracy abroad. While the historical record outside Europe shows that the democracy at home is completely compatible with tyranny abroad. One of the things is that this is not something recent. You have books written about Britain,

or France where they talk about the democratic rights in these countries and they will talk that they are the major source of freedom. Yet, for two hundred years, the majority of people ruled by the British and the French had no political rights whatsoever. So you have someone like John Stuart Mill who was considered to be a great theoretician of liberalism sitting in the colonial administration in India talking about liberty without mentioning the fact that he is governing the people who have no liberty at all. This is not just hypocrisy. This is considered to be somehow a personal anomaly. When I would say to you it is actually a structural factor—the split between the empire and the nation which is replayed now in a form that the democracy is something that happened inside the West and outside it there can never be a democracy. I think that is the real problem.

**How do you see the role of Turkey in the Middle East? The Prime Minister Davutoğlu defines the current process in the Middle East as a “normalization of the world history”, do you agree with it?**

I think the prime minister is correct and diplomatic while calling it as a normalization of the world history. I would say there is a prior step which is the de-colonization of the world history but I think we probably mean similar things. What we are referring to is that the world history was colonized by the Western

history. I think that requires active de-colonization. Perhaps, the prime minister thinks that normalization would be sufficient but this is a matter of detail. In terms of the role of Turkey, what is missing right now for a long time until the crisis of the so-called Arab is that the idea that Turkey basically could have zero problems. I think the pace of the historical change has speeded up and it is not possible to have zero problems anymore and I think they recognize that. What is needed is a narrative which puts all of these things together and new grammar around the new Turkey. I think that is the urgent task. Otherwise, you are constantly being caught by events and driven into incoherent positions or you are led to failure. There is a linkage between the opposition and the AKP between the idea of what the role of Muslims will be and to what the role of West is in this world. So you cannot have a new Turkey without new grammar. It is a very good example because it does not dictate what you say in the sense that I cannot predict what you are going to say but I know that you have to obey the rules of grammar. That is what reality is necessary.

**When we look at the Turkish Foreign Policy in the pre-Arab Spring era, the civilization was the main grammar in terms of framing Turkey’s existence in the Middle East as well as in different regions. So should we think about the same narratives, when we an-**

**analyse the Turkish role by taking into consideration the civilizational discourse?**

My feeling is this that the civilizational discourse does not help the production of a new grammar in Turkey. It is locked into previous ways of thinking and it is very limited. The situation demands something more. My preference would be to talk about this in terms of recognition of the political roots. Civilization gives you a sense of Huntingtonian entities of super-duration. I am always suspicious of the category of civilization simply because I do not think that there are actually multiple civilizations. Right now there is a civilization which is centered in the West and everything else is non-civilized. You cannot say what the Islamic Civilization is. I think the metaphor of civilization is too static for a very mobile situation. It also presents certain continuities which do not longer exist and try to find an essence which I do not think is possible. Therefore, for me, it is much more possible to see it not in terms of civilization or etiquette but more kind of a de-colonization, an attempt to not recover the past but to build the future. One of the difficulties we have when we talk about the civilizational discourse is, for example, that we all think of Islam as a religion and without thinking that Muslims did not think of themselves as a religion until the category of religion was brought and they had to reorganize themselves for that. Islam has always been

problematic. For example, the arguments for secularism say that we have to keep the Church and state separately. Look at the experience in Turkey where you have secularism. You have the expansion of the state. It became the main provider for the Church. So it was not that the state and the Church became separate. It was that the state consumed every Muslim independent institution. So I think it may be more useful to think of Islam as of a language by which Muslims tell stories about themselves. If we think of it in those terms, it frees us. I once heard that “there are rules in Islam for everything and there is a rule for sleeping on the right side”. And the thing is of course there is but I do not know if every single Muslim sleeps on the right side. This kind of thought becomes absurd. You cannot turn Islam into accountancy. One of the things Khomeini did just before he died, was that he made a ruling which people like Olivia Roy and others say that this is secular ruling in which he said the Islamic Republic can abrogate any provision of Islam to assure its survival. They read this as a secularist concession. Whereas for me, it is actually profoundly Islamic because for Khomeini and for Muslims, Islam is an ontological category. So in the name of Islam, what matters is what you can do. That is why I believe that civilization may not be helpful because it is contaminated with too many notions which emphasize mobility, flexibility and which seem to look towards the past. I think

we need to understand that Islam is something which has a language and is living and it is for the future. Otherwise, when the language is not spoken, it becomes dead, and the language that is spoken, is constantly being changed and transformed and at the same time remains the very same language. Perhaps, when we look for new grammar for a new Turkey, it would mean that various narratives like alliance between civilizations have to be perhaps jettisoned because they are no longer helpful in that situation.

**There have been seen three models in Middle East represented by Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. How do you see these models and what can be their impact on the future of the Middle East?**

The Saudi Arabian Model has no future for the Middle East, for Muslims or for anyone else on this planet. So I would say the biggest obstacle to peace and prosperity in the region is Saudi Arabia. And the biggest obstacle to Muslim unity or sovereignty is Saudis. Regarding the differences between the Turkish so-called model and Iranian model, I think there is a lot more in common between the two models. So I think those two are not opposing models. I think there is one model between them which once we get beyond the particularities of how they got there, I think it is really productive and that model is that they have more or less accountable, predictable and transparent govern-

ments. You may not like the rules but you cannot know what the rules are. One would want in both of the systems that you can have room for reform and improvement but I think that is a very different set of things.

**Can we have any optimistic expectations for the future of the Middle East?**

You must always have optimistic expectation for the future. Things are very difficult right now but the reason why things are difficult is because things are changing. I am reluctant to talk about the Middle East in isolation for a number of reasons. In 1900, 80% of all Muslims were living under colonial rule. By 1925, the Muslim public presence was restricted to a few areas. There was a sense in which being a Muslim would make no significance to anyone's life. I think people forget about the time when the Tunisian government in 1960s introduced legislation banning fasting. How many governments now anywhere would want to introduce a legislation banning fasting. It is difficult, although for example Angola is trying to do that. Among areas where there is a substantial Muslim population, I think it would really be unthinkable. If you look at that kind of longer trajectory and depending on what your investments are, surely when we have a situation that, the people of the region and Muslims in general have the opportunity to start writing their own history again. The fate that had awaited Muslims was de-Islamisation. They survived the Communism,

colonialism, and mass slavery. So I cannot be pessimistic. There are more Muslims now than there have ever been. So you are talking about a massive de-Islamisation on a global scale, which I think would be incredibly violent. Or we start to accommodate and build up structures and institutions which make that representation possible. That seems to me as the only solution left. I think one path leads to a difficult but possible peace and cooperation. And the other path leads to a permanent dirty war on a global

level. The most interesting thing for me is that about a half to one third of the enslaved population taken to the Americas were Muslims. Their de-Islamisation was one of the most severe ones. But now there are about three million of who have become Muslims again. They have done so without actually being able to connect to the place of their ancestry. Therefore, I do not see any reason to be pessimistic.

*Thank you...*

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