

The Strength of the Weak: Towards Inclusive Citizenship In the Middle East and North Africa

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In a modest Zoroastrian temple in Sulaymaniyah, I engaged in a seemingly unending discussion with the "Spiritual Guide" of Zoroastrianism, in the presence of some of his most prominent followers, on the history of their religion — a faith that occupies an outstanding position in the annals of the religious and philosophical history of the ancient world. The Guide and his entourage were just back from a short trip to oversee an event of conversion or, more precisely, "reclaiming new converts." A few weeks earlier, he and his followers had started their Zoroastrian holy day celebrations, such as the "Mehraban" on 25th December. At those celebrations, he declared his wish to restore a number of Zoroastrian temples or at least construct some new ones.

This Kurdish veteran fighter had engaged in guerrilla wars that raged for several years in the ranks of the Kurdish National Movement that aimed their guns towards the Iraqi State. All along, he harbored a dream of descending from the mountain, carrying with him the mission of his ancient prophet —

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Zoroaster. Soon he moved from the zenith of resistance to begin an earthly spiritual tour that bore its fruit over the last two decades: announcing the establishment of the "Zoroastrian Supreme Council" and triggering what he calls a "cultural revolution" to revive a 3,500-year-old religion.

Thus, Zoroastrianism comes back to life in an agitated and tattering East, where it was its dominant faith long before the Middle East came to know its three Abrahamic religions, which spread worldwide (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). This comeback of Zoroastrianism creates a paradox that cannot be ignored: it comes precisely when this East is robbed of its religious diversity represented by Christians, Yazidis, and Mandaeans and converted into an East of uniform religion, color, and ethnicity. But the same centrifugal force that repulsed diversity has simultaneously paved the way for the revival of a religion that had been in a nebulous latency for more than fifteen centuries.

However, this was not a casual and isolated phenomenon: when I journeyed through the Kaka'i (or Yarasani) villages, to the south of Kirkuk on my way up to Sulaymaniyah, and as I turned eastwards to Halabja where Iraq borders the Islamic Republic of Iran, I found the revival of another faith whose followers observed silence and espoused secrecy for centuries. There, as my Guide escorted me, Ramadan Himerkhan Shakrum, I had the opportunity to witness the miracle of an ancient spiritual reviviscence.

Shakrum, who authored an amazing book on Kaka'ism in the Kurdish language, was stroking his Kaka'i trademark, a thick mustache, in a manner that made the world seem to seesaw at each of this mustache's two pointed tips. His words took me to an imaginary world of pure serenity in the Kaka'i "Hawrar" village near the Iran border. We passed by a shrine that he described as a place where the hordes of Muslims that once marched from Arabia had reached on the way back. "Here," he said, "and at this religious fault line, fighting and genocide took place. The commander of the Muslim army was killed. The shrine of this commander was a symbol of decisive history. For the Kaka'is, it is the "invader's monument." However, some got used to it and viewed it as a shrine of a revered personage. This shrine/monument became the symbol of a Kaka'i community schism: one faction upholds Islam, while the other attempts to revive its original tenets. This inner conflict in a religious community, whose beliefs rely on taciturnity and secrecy, is yet another phenomenon that we cannot ignore,

given the recent revival of ancient forms of diversity as a consequence of war, violence, and disintegration of the state/nation.

In the extreme south of Iraq, my departed colleague, the late Jalal Diab, once the most prominent leader of the Afro-Iraqi community, hung posters of Martin Luther King and Barak Obama on the walls of his school as teaching aids. He established this school in 2009 in order to offer education to children of the impoverished community of Basra's Zubair slums. The two posters signaled an unexpected identity wakeup call in the neighborhoods of the black minority of a city that is considered the economic hub of Iraq and the primary source of its oil wealth. The manifestations of the revival of diversity pose a challenge to a country that is evidently disintegrating and fragmenting — for these two black icons hinted a different Iraq that was at the time "possible": a homeland that is being imagined through the struggle of civil society activists and advocates of human rights. The heretofore muzzled history became awakened through the inspirational influence of these icons, and what was lost, or willfully forgotten, resurged amidst the media's din and bustle and the news of sectarian violence and widespread internal instability. Thus, thanks to the war on Iraq and its invasion, claims that were not imaginable before 2003 in general and before President Barak Obama's US election victory, in particular, have eventually seen the light!

These triple panoramas of Zoroastrians, Kaka'is, and Afro-Iraqis are but signs of the dynamics of death and resurrection of diversity in Iraq, which became apparent under the limelight of the violent transformations that are being experienced in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), such that the Region became prey to cruel and horrifying terms like "*international intervention*," "*forced migration*," "*demographic shift*," "*civil war*," "*ethnic cleansing*," "*genocide*," "*war crimes*," "*crimes against humanity*," and the like.

From Armenians to Yazidis: a century of genocides

In the summer of 2020, I visited Singar, west of the Nineveh Governorate in northern Iraq. There I met various Yazidi personalities, notably from Kuju village. A youth survivor escorted me for a tour inside the school where the Yazidi inhabitants of the village were rounded up and then sorted out and murdered at the hands of ISIS fighters. There, he quietly pointed to his family photo, and portraits of his two murdered sisters, as if they belonged to another

world remote from a village that became a death museum. Then he took me to the fields of mass murder and showed me the dug-out mass graves from which the UN team exhumed the once piled remains and sent them to Baghdad for laboratory tests in order to reveal the victims' identities. Next to these mass graves, individual graves, each bearing a specific name, were prepared yet still gaping in anticipation of entombment of corpses once their identities become known through those DNA lab tests.

Speaking of the lucky Yazidi survivors, who knew of the impending approach of black ISIS banners and had the chance to escape, they pursued the road towards the only Yazidi refuge that was available – Sinjar Mountain. I traveled in the company of a Yazidi friend across the road to this Mountain in the footsteps of those Yazidis who fled from the killing machine, thus leaving behind all they owned. The photographs that were published of this flight to these desolate, remote mountains brought to mind the pictures of the Armenians who were, one century earlier, deported under the Ottoman rule and faced death and thirst in the wilderness of Syria and Mesopotamia. Around one hundred years ago, the Armenians were expelled from the Anatolia Plateau southwards into these desert plains. In contrast, the Yazidis fled northwards, seeking shelter in the sky above their heads!

I looked to the opposite direction across the plain that borders Syria, where other desolate cities lay in a manner that reminds us of obliterated cities during World War II — Stalingrad and Berlin are examples. The Aleppo region in Syria bears a similitude to Sinjar of Iraq – its desolation was indicative of cities annihilated, not to mention the decimation of their inhabitants. A hundred years ago, the Armenians (yesterday's victims) were received across this border by the Yazidis (today's victims). Memories of that mass flight and mass reception remain indelible. Some caves in Mount Sinjar contain Yazidi skeletons commingled with those of fugitive Armenians who sought refuge in these high peaks.

The thread that links the Yazidi genocide to the Armenian genocide of more than a century earlier indicates the concept of continuity since our Middle East episode is not peerless. The world system is replete with similar crimes: From the Fifteenth Century to the Nineteenth, the Europeans had cleansed the Earth from indigenous populations of Australia and North America. Additionally, during the first decade of the Twentieth Century, Imperial Germany committed

the Herero genocide of South-West Africa (today's Namibia). Similarly, totalitarian regimes such as Hitler's Nazism, Stalinist and Maoist Communism were at the forefront of systems that committed genocide. After the end of the cold war, racist propensities raised their head again with more acts of genocide, especially after the failure of the (Iraqi) State, the absence of which allowed sectarian chieftains and identity mongers to metamorphose into Mafia bosses who use ethnic cleansing as means of achieving their goals. The recent events that followed the ISIS overrun of Syria and Iraq —preceded by the 1995 events of Yugoslavia in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1999 Kosovo, 1994 Rwanda, and 2003 Darfur — proved how the threat of genocide remains to be a leading headline in global politics.

That more than sixty million people became victims of genocide in the twentieth century alone — not to mention the recent human losses in Bosnia and Rwanda, or the victims of Darfur, Syria, and Iraq — is something that deserves a precautionary stance from our part to prevent the repetition of such tragedies.

A forgotten revolution in the Middle East

Before the Middle East's Armenian commemoration of the centenary of their genocide, and the celebration of the Bahá'ís of the Bicentenary of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh (of which I am going to speak later in the course of describing the plight of this religious minority in this same part of the world), African origin inhabitants of the Middle East celebrated Barak Obama's election to US presidency.

Since Obama's winning of the United States presidency in 2008 and until the murder of George Floyd in 2020, it seems that there is a growing awakening to the rights of Middle East blacks. Increasing testaments are being made to the discrimination that they face in more than one Muslim or Arab countries, especially while the murder of George Floyd and the ensuing protests in the United States gave rise to a large-scale discussion in the Middle East of the discrimination and inequality that African Americans are still facing. Yet, the opponents of American policies used it as indicative of America's failure as a model of democratic change in the Middle East. However, another widening discussion started on discrimination and inequality, in which the blacks suffer in the Region. I witnessed the emergence of these claims in the Iraqi context,

especially with the presence of an icon that resembles George Floyd — that is, the social activist, Jalal Diab, who was assassinated in Basra, south Iraq, in the year 2013.

Jalal Diab was a founding member of the "Free Iraqis Movement," also known as *Ansar Al Hurriyya* "Freedom Supporters," in order to oppose the policies of discrimination towards the Afro-Iraqis, whose countrywide demographic magnitude is estimated to be 400,000 strong- with their demographic concentration in Basra, south of Iraq. When I met Jalal in 2009, he hung posters of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Barak Obama on the walls of his school as teaching aids for the impoverished Afro-Iraqi children, following Obama's winning of the US presidency. The two posters signaled an unexpected identity wakeup call in Basra's black minority neighborhoods and spoke of a different Iraq that is "possible" as embodied by the struggle of the defenders of equality and the opponents of racial discrimination. It is through the inspirational influence of this icon that the history of this alienated, marginalized segment of society became awakened – a history that Muslim Arab historians purposefully muzzled, i.e., stories of the abduction and procurement of Jalal's ancestors from Africa to Iraq at the hands of Arab slave traders, not to mention their revolution that was buried into oblivion in Arab history books.

Jalal, who was born in Zubair, the Afro-Iraqi's demographic focal point, was a revolutionary who wanted to free his community from the yoke of oppression that lingered for centuries when Muslim caliphs in both Umayyad and Abbasside dynasties bequeathed vast estates to commanders of warring armies that conquered the world from extreme east to extreme west. Those commanders exploited black-skinned subjects to rehabilitate and cultivate their lands, with tens of thousands of them laboring under cruel conditions, thus giving rise to repeated uprisings. Foremost among those uprisings was the one known as "the Zanj Rebellion" that lasted for 15 years (from 879 to 883 AD). The suppression of this rebellion was accompanied by cruel measures that had completely eradicated this mutinous black force. In political and religious terms, the rebellion was considered taboo: "insurrection against the sacred reign of the Caliph of Islam"!

Jalal's ancestors inhabited the marshlands of Basra, exposed to fatal pestilences in an environment known for its relentless climate. In addition to their hard

labor, their scanty food was far below the minimum requirements of their servile labor. Their social fabric was shattering due to living far away from their ancestral homelands. They were forced to transport salt on the back of mules to markets and other selling outlets. Others toiled at homes of merchants, peoples of wealth, and local magnates. Through the years, their children became part and parcel of a bequeathal that was passed to the wealthy men of Basra, the chieftains of south Iraq, their feudal subordinates, and families of influence. Their history accumulated across centuries to belie a culture the repercussions of which haunt us until the present day. These same repercussions continue to haunt today's Afro-Iraqi community by the same token. It was Jalal who resurrected all of this hushed past, which our school curricula and official history books have ignored. He also linked this wounded memory, of the Afro-Iraqi past, to promises of liberation from that place in the post-US-occupation Iraq. Furthermore, he drew attention to another force of change through which the Afro-Iraqis may play a prominent role in enriching Iraq's diversity and plurality by virtue of their remarkable vitality.

"I have a dream!" in Basra

The pulsating spirit of the Afro-Iraqi movement was getting stronger with Diab in its midst as a father of a family of separated and scattered members. None of these family members would know the other, except through silence, oppression, and oblivion. Yet, Diab's modest demeanor, together with his words, was like the bond that cemented them anew. Such words were in no way less influential than Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream!" speech — the catchphrase of his speech at Lincoln Memorial on 28 August 1963, in the course of the Washington freedom march. In this speech, Dr. King expressed his wish to witness a future in which blacks and whites coexist in perfect freedom, equality, and harmony.

I remember that when I saw Jalal for the first time at the headquarters of the Human Freedom Supporters' society, we compared memories on this famous speech of Martin Luther King, "I have a dream!" I wondered then whether he harbors a similar dream: a vision of a future where discrimination against blacks would cease, thus putting an end to the once aborted Zanj Rebellion — yet its repercussions persistently remained for centuries under the ashes. In answer to my question, Jalal pointed to three posters on the wall: in the middle was that of Martin Luther King, flanked by two for Barak Obama who had just

won the race for US presidency. I immediately understood the noble endeavors of this man who was just three years old when Dr. King was assassinated on 4 April 1968. At such an early age, none would have imagined that the influence of King's speech would cross over thousands of miles and become Jalal's personal dream after fourscore years. While Jalal was not endowed with King's rhetoric, yet he believed that the visitation of equality expressed in the "I have a dream" speech had finally been fulfilled on the same day Obama won the presidential election on 20 November 2009. He also believed that this same dream might be fulfilled in Iraq one day in the future.

I am convinced that the similarity between Jalal and Dr. King was not superficial, despite the 45-year time gap that separated the two assassinations and the difference in the social context between the US and Iraq. First, the two were assassinated in the same month (i.e., April), and, secondly, the motives of the two crimes were political. Thus the criminal motive has been eliminated. Thirdly, at that time that Jalal became an icon to his Afro-Iraqi community, the episode of assassinating this father of four children (three of whom were girls) became a symptom of the predominance of a culture of impunity and the attempt to put an end to the dream of an entire community by one treacherous bullet. The murder of George Floyd revived the plight of the Afro-Iraqi community, yet in a different context. But Martin Luther King's dream of equality could not uproot racism in other countries that are surely-footed in democracy.

If we speak of differences between the two figures, Jalal did not have what was at King's fingertips, notably that King had his Ph.D. degree at Boston University. Jalal did not even obtain a university education. He was, though, a pragmatic person who was ready to learn. Again, it is true that in the context of Basra and Iraq in general, circumstances were not ripe for the evolvment of a civil entity similar to the US Civil Rights Movement. Additionally, it seems impossible that Jalal, like Dr. King, would address some 250 000 civil rights supporters who aspired to eliminate racial discrimination. But Jalal's passion for change was also as unyielding as a rock — a fact that had been evidenced by his ability to persuade slum-grown children to join his school and youth to acquire skills that would put an end to their chronic unemployment. Although, when he escorted me downstairs to see the modest offices of his organization — where the steps were not as impressive as those of the Lincoln Memorial that was converted

into a grand theatre for King's oratory — yet he would talk at every workshop to which I would invite him in Baghdad or Basra, with striking courage. He could revive a hushed history of discrimination and a tale of a black rebellion that lied dormant under the ashes, such that the audience would raise their hands in disapproval — since it was an audience shorn of the courage to admit mistakes or the ability to courageously face its past and sort out inherited traditions — all of which being actions that are a prerequisite to any process of comprehensive reform.

But, because he was like a pope to the blacks that came to declare a new faith, "Father" Jalal's Society of Human Freedom Supporters became like the church of the poor: a papal seat to which the faithful flock to obtain the blessing of their rebirth in the form of volunteering work, learning new skills or conducting wedding ceremonies inside the organization, to name but a few. Before Jalal realized the significance of the place — which became a place for black identity — the building was converted into a holy shrine. Its walls became coated with henna, noting that it was located in the archaeological site of Zubair.

Before the advent of the Black Pope, people would usually seek the help of clan chieftains for dispute and conflict resolution. Since the Afro-Iraqis were quasi-clan members or shadows thereof, it was easy for chieftains to compromise their rights or favor others at their expense. The affiliation of those chieftains with various clans is nominal and different from the blood relationship that cements together the descendants of the same ethnicity. As such, the chieftains could not figure out their ancestry trees. Under such circumstances, the community started to flock towards Jalal with their problems for possible solutions. The latter would invariably struggle to stop this age-long humiliation of black-skinned people. Consequently, the reign of chieftains waned, and a new authority emerged in its stead that exerted a gravitational pull among the blacks — one that was difficult to grasp without understanding the Afro-Iraqi history from the Zanj Rebellion to our present day. By reviving this spirit, Jalal had virtually crossed a red line and challenged many authorities around him, both ceremonial and real.

Jalal took to the task of establishing a charity fund to assist Afro-Iraqis in matters like conducting their wedding ceremonies and providing their festive requirements. It seemed that the psyche of utter joy that overtook this otherwise grim Afro-Iraqi episode became an inexhaustible resource for the

new spirit. Yet, the most important service that Jalal rendered remains the school he established to combat Afro-Iraqi illiteracy and use its pedagogic potential as a vehicle for their social education. The society's building stood high amid an ocean of Afro-Iraqi slums like the mast of Noah's Ark of salvation. Thus this "barge" of the Black Pope opened its ports to whoever longed for emancipation from neglect and oblivion, and the slum-dwellers flocked around the society's building in Zubair's archaeological area as if being attracted by an invisible force. No wonder then, considering that these were the same neighborhoods where most Afro-Iraqis had taken residence, after being gradually liberated from the yoke of local magnates and feudal lords since the establishment of modern Iraq.

Yet the dream that Jalal Diab managed to inspire was silenced by bullets in 2013. This movement represented a threat to the factions of political Islam that were imposing a different culture in the country, who considered Diab's movement a sign of America's harmful influence. They also viewed it as a threat to their ideological identity forcibly imposed on their people. But such a legacy cannot be silenced for long since it indicated the possibility of revolt against any suffocating authority that manipulates a sacred cause to kill people's dream of change. After a lapse of seven years since Jalal's assassination, the murder of George Floyd revived the dream of Iraq's own Martin Luther King of social equality and opposing discrimination. It might revive a similar dream for all African-origin inhabitants of the Middle East. Indeed, the flame of Jalal's vision of equality and non-discrimination will never die out.

An Abrahamic Coalition in the Middle East

Following the first Papal visit to the Holy Land in 1964, the Middle East became the main destination for Papal visits. Although such trips covered many of the Region's countries, the Pontiff never made it to Iraq for decades.

Nevertheless, the late Pope John Paul II attempted to exert a more significant influence through expanding the range of his intense activities in celebrating the second millennium and added Iraq as one of his journey's main stops. This was in view of the fact that, according to the three Abrahamic traditions (Jewish, Christian, and Islamic), the Prophet Abraham began his faith-related journey from the city of Ur. Hence the Pope's initial travel plans to the Middle East comprised three journeys: his trip to the Holy Land (which took place by

the end of March 2000) and his visit (in February 2000) to Mount Sinai, where Moses received Israel's Covenant. Yet Pope John Paul II's third journey to the city of Ur did not materialize. Thus the land of Abraham was sidelined from the Pope's itinerary, and Iraq lost its chance of reintegration into the international community, subsequent to its decade-long period of international sanctions as a consequence of the 1991 Gulf War.

Pope Francis in Ur

In the year 2021, the historic visit of Pope Francis to the cradle of Prophet Abraham and his prayers in Ur reverberated the echoes of Pope John Paul II's success: the latter's journey to Morocco in 1985 addressing the youth and inviting them to create a future of peace for all; and his holding of the World Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi together with representatives from various religious communities — an event that is regularly observed since 1986 and which gained a special significance when the youth in Iraq marched in October 2019 in an aspiring effort to create such a peaceful future for all their compatriots.

During preparations for the Papal visit, many meetings put me in direct contact with youth from various cities of Iraq - from the oil-rich Basra in the south to Mosul in the north where religious diversity comprises the Yazidis of Singar, the Christians and Shabaks of Nineveh Plain, the Turkmen of Tal Afar, and the Arabs, Kurds, and Kaka'is of various towns of Mosul. It was during such occasions that I spoke to the youth at three fascinating instances that were availed to the people of Iraq after decades of dictatorship, economic sanctions, and punitive occupation: first, when the Iraqis became united against ISIS in 2014 in revenge for destroying their shared heritage. Second, the youth uprising of protest in October 2019, which reflected for the first time widespread solidarity among various Iraqi generations, both in the homeland and the Diaspora, as well as among diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds. The third occasion was during the Papal visit that gave the world a picture of Iraq different from what was hitherto shown on satellite channels, i.e., scenes of destruction, war, strife, and mass killing. It was a visit that brought to Iraqis memories of their sterling religious legacy, which they carried forward and bequeathed to the world — with the Prophet Abraham's home being in Ur, and hence his journey that changed the spiritual map of the ancient world and laid the launching foundation for the emergence of three great religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

It was a great challenge that lasted for more than one year of continuous endeavors in order to prepare for the much-awaited Papal visit, and for more than 15 years in terms of interfaith dialogue on matters such as: how we could spread awareness of responding to the Papal visit in a manner that would stimulate the mission of Iraq as a country of religious pluralism; and how the papal visit may be given a wider symbolic span inspired by the pluralistic nature of Mesopotamia, implicitly appealing for a change of the stereotype impression about the country.

In a sense, the papal visit put a cap on many past phases of my life as an Iraqi youth whose perceptions were formed via three decades of war: i.e., the war with Iran (1980–1988); the war of liberating Kuwait from Iraq (1991); the war of international sanctions against Iraq (1991–2003); and, ultimately, the American invasion and occupation of Iraq, as of 2003. In 2000, the late Pope John Paul wished to visit the ancient Iraqi city of Ur — as the first leg of three pilgrimage tours that he planned to take across Iraq, Egypt, and Israel. The visit did not materialize after the collapse of negotiations with Saddam Hussein's Iraqi government at that time. Down through the lapse of two decades, papal visits became a mirror that reflected the profound metamorphoses that Iraq underwent on social and political levels. Past visit prospects were met with severe challenges over the past twenty years: the first visit was scheduled during the ministry of the late Pope John Paul II, precisely in December 1999, as part of the historic papal tours by the end of the second millennium. However, this visit was canceled for political reasons when Saddam Hussein was at the helm. The second visit was decided twenty years after this first attempt, yet it was also canceled for security reasons. During his visit to Iraq in January 2019, Vatican Foreign Minister Cardinal Pietro Parolin said that the minimum security requirements for a visit were lacking at the time.

The announcement of his Holiness, Pope Francis, that he intended to visit Iraq in 2020 was a source of personal comfort on my part. But the postponement of the visit for a whole year filled me with disappointment. I was on a visit to Kurdistan when I learned of the statement of the Vatican's foreign minister, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, that prevailing circumstances were not favorable for the papal visit to Iraq. In an interview with TV 2000 Channel, Parolin — who had visited Iraq earlier — remarked that such a visit required the presence of minimum security conditions, and these were not then at hand. Therefore,

when Pope Francis spoke of his decision that the year 2021 would be that of his visit to Iraq, I posted a brief notice on my FaceBook page that was addressed to the Iraqi people about this forthcoming visit: "The visit of Pope Francis is unique of its kind not just because it is a tour into the Land of Abraham, Sumer, Babylon, and Assyria by the Apostolic See, but because it is also a historical moment when the entire world is watching who are the people of Iraq, for the first time." In this notice, I hinted that: "It is a historical moment since the world would not be viewing you from the lens of the international press or Arab media — that is, not in the stereotyped portrayals of Fox News, CNN, Al-Jazeera, or Al-Arabia. It is a historic opportunity because it may provide a glance of your real identity that was buried under the ashes of time".

In yet another open message addressed to the people of Iraq, I wrote that the visit "is a historical moment, because the world would be taking a second look of you: this time the world will look at you outside the lens of failure, war, conflict — away from a homeland that has been reduced into a place of desecration, bereft of sovereignty, a target of various terrorist organizations, the mafia, and militias, in which they can wreak havoc. It is a fleeting moment for the international community to rediscover your great cultural and spiritual capabilities – a moment to understand how religions sprung out of your ancient homeland, to celebrate your forefather Abraham as the Patriarch of all Prophets, and to cherish your city of Ur as the birthplace of God's Messengers."

I meant to urge the citizens to stop dealing with the visit as a platform to propagate negative aspects by my message. I also meant to invite the Iraqis to use it to regain trust in their identity and homeland and confidence in their country of Iraq that is, indeed, a bastion of diversity and as the birthplace of religions and civilizations. I concluded this message by saying: "Loosen not your grip from the only moment of pride that you have ever seen in so many years, just because you didn't see heretofore anything farther than your suffocating political reality."

How much I admired the insistence of His Holiness Pope Francis to visit Iraq, irrespective of security threats, rampant shelling, and worldwide distortions of the image of Iraq! It was a commendable decision. Part of his insistence might have been, in my opinion, due to the fact that he underwent circumstances that were similar to what is happening in our country. Bergoglio (his pre-papal name) lived most of his professional career in Argentina. There, he experienced a difficult phase in the history of his homeland. In the late 1970s, a faction of

the army took control of Argentina and ruled ruthlessly with an iron fist until 1983 — an era that came to be known as the "Dirty War." Thousands of Argentines were either kidnapped or murdered, including some clergy that were accused of acting against the state.

I also believe that Pope Francis represents a turning point in the modern history of the Roman Catholic Papacy — something that is quite unusual given that the Papacy is an institution that manifests an unmistakable continuum of successive pontiffs who would seldom abandon the teachings or contributions of their predecessors. In contrast, recent history itself is a witness of undeniable novelties that some successive pontiffs have devised, with each Pope placing his own "version" on the papal desk together with its implementation or blueprint. For example — and even with the basic tenets of the Catholic belief or the fundamental standpoints of the Catholic Church remaining untouched in the long run — the background of both Pope John Paul II as a philosopher in his own right and a former church leader of communist-dominated Poland, and the subsequent ministry of Pope Benedict XVI as an academic theologian and official guardian of the Catholic belief — must have influenced their teachings and achievements throughout their lives. This is because each of the two had left a unique legacy that reflected his personal history and particular interests. The uniqueness of Pope Francis, on the other hand, lies in his extreme humility and simplicity. His visit to Iraq — the cradle of divine revelations — will be a bright spot in his enduring legacy.

This papal visit was for me, as a protagonist of diversity, a rare opportunity to attract attention to the constitutive elements of Iraq's diversity — elements that represent points of strength that qualify the country to become a focal point of religious discourse in the Region, especially at a time when MENA is witnessing deep, ethnic schisms because of the sectarian policies that dominated it for decades. To such schisms, we may add the inheritance of the Arab-Israeli conflict in recent decades and the novel risks that threaten the very existence of Christian communities that currently undergo virtual extinction in some countries of the Region after ISIS overran both in Syria and in Iraq. In like manner, this Papal visit was an opportunity for presenting the soft-power elements of the richly diverse Iraqi civil society as a single reference point for all components of society, upon the light of the shared religious heritage that it embraces, as far as the followers of the three great religions are concerned.

However, the Pope's influence might be more widespread and inclusive of the entire Region than merely confined to Iraq. In the first place, he is a Third-World citizen and leader of the world's smallest nation, the Vatican City-State, as well as the Vicegerent of the Apostolic See, in his capacity as the Head of the Catholic Church. As such, he combines several unique and interlocking titles and categories. We need to understand the nature of these interrelated roles and their combined influence on his decisions and the formulation of his policies. Of particular interest is that his work with the cause of climate change provides us with a close study of a sublime example of exercising moral authority on the global level. Due to our planet's lack of a world government, those official spokespersons who champion global interests — in contrast to those who represent narrower national interests — are really hard to come by. Pope Francis, moreover, presents a unique moral framework in an ultra-secular age. As a matter of fact, through his thoughts, words, and deeds, he espouses and embodies moral leadership in several global social, economic, and political arenas.

To mention but a few, the Apostolic See had formerly played a prominent role in some of the UN forums, such as influencing the deliberations of the 1994 Population Conference in Cairo, the 1995 Women's Conference in Beijing, and the General Assembly's 2001 special session on HIV-AIDS. However, the matter is different when it comes to the Apostolic See's role in such issues as the Middle East's instability and conflict. Because of the symbolic and spiritual position of the Region's states and the nature of the conflict that engages the followers of Abrahamic faiths, the situation here assumes a much greater complexity. Typical examples of this complexity are the 1991 Gulf War, the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the civil wars in Syria and Yemen, and the 1979 Islamic Revolution of Iran.

Relying on Pope Paul VI's first visit to the Holy Land and the interfaith horizon ushered in by the Second Vatican Council, Pope John Paul II laid the foundation for an active papal role in the Middle East. His vision of an Abrahamic Middle East was that of achieving peace in the Region — a vision that might be seen as an Abrahamic coalition in global policy.

In more detail, the papal successors of John Paul II went on with this papal pilgrimage for peace. While Pope Benedict XVI was optimistic enough to exercise pressure for change and extending a welcoming hand to the Arab

Spring as a step forward to explore the "post-secular era" — to borrow papal terms — Pope Francis, who is a contemporary of the civil war in Syria and the rise of the Islamic State, chose to tread a more effective political and diplomatic path. His journey to Abu Dhabi in 2020 and his 2021 visit to Iraq may be viewed in this context. Furthermore, the Declaration of Human Fraternity may be considered a renewal of the Abrahamic coalition for the advancement of peace in the Middle East.

The Papacy and three Mideast options

The Pope's call for a review of the post-secular era in the Middle East is an attempt to chart a third course in the middle between the two extremes of political Islam and secular nationalism by stressing the need for a neutral space in which both Christians and Muslims can coexist under the umbrella of a faith-based human fellowship. Overwhelmed by their sufferings, the Christians are unaware that this vision may bring salvation to their communities, which have degenerated over time, and save their homelands from collapse and conflict.

This papal vision assumed special importance after the "Arab Spring" disappointments. After the protests that burst forth from Tunisia reached Egypt in a few months, the Arab Spring became a Christian cause. Both Christians and Muslims jointly protested against a secular system whose authority depended on the ability to pit Muslims against Copts. This short-lived spring bore bitter fruit for the Christians of the Orient. The hopes of both Christians and Muslims for a positive change that would provide a favorable alternative to the national military state were shattered. Despite Pope Benedict's support of the democratization process that he hoped to characterize this "Spring," the outcome was disappointing in Egypt and horrifying in Syria. The only country that managed to bypass this bottleneck was Tunisia, notwithstanding that it is geographically remote as if it belonged to another world. Tunisia is insignificant either for the Christians of the Orient or with regard to the scenario that saw the end of diversity in the Middle East.

Thus, the Middle East transformations remained perpetual challenges from the Papacy's perspective. The Region is a cradle for the faith-based fellowship of the three Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It thus has special significance, both spiritual and symbolic to the Apostolic See, even though a sizeable portion of its faithful falls outside the spiritual authority of

Rome and constitutes a highly fragmented spectrum that is threatened with extinction. Whether at the level of ruling governments or the social attitude, we find that Christians in most Middle Eastern countries represent politically ineffective minorities. Even such Christian populations are fragmented into several denominations; most are non-Catholic.

Nevertheless, in addition to the Catholics, who follow the tenets of the Latin and Maronite churches in Lebanon, there are a number of churches that are in full partnership with Rome's Pontiff: i.e., the Royal Roman Catholic Church (of Damascus), the Chaldean Catholic Church (of Baghdad), the Coptic Catholic Church (of Cairo), the Syrian Catholic Church (of Damascus), and the Armenian Catholic Church (of Beirut). Additionally, and as a part of this diversity, two Indian churches may be considered: The Syrian-Malabar Catholic Church and the Syrian-Malankara Catholic Church, with both churches enjoying solid historical ties to the Oriental churches of the Middle East. The membership of these two Indian churches currently consists of the Indian migrants who represent an important segment of the labor force in the Arabian Peninsula.

In terms of involvement in Middle East politics, this papal presence emerged as part of the wrangling that characterized the post-Ottoman and post-colonial eras. It found itself face-to-face with secular nationalism and, later, political Islam, the star of which rose with the 1979 Revolution in Iran. It is to be noted that political Islam gained additional strength by the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the changes brought about by the Arab Spring in 2011. In my opinion, the Papacy is attempting to suggest a third scenario that surpasses both the option of secular nationalism with its garment of Arabism and political Islam, with its ideological exclusivity and its dominance of the public sphere. The Papacy is also attempting to interact with the Middle East characterized by common Abrahamic roots to create a post-sectarian vision, where a new neutral space would be opening up for all citizens of the Region irrespective of their religious affiliations.

It is to be noted that, during the era of secular nationalism, the Christians of the Middle East redefined their identity away from their religious identity and integrated themselves into systems that replaced the Ottoman sectarian regime. There, they had a chance to win some sort of equality as citizens who were on a par with the Muslims. In certain instances, they were at the forefront of the stage, such as in the case of Tariq Aziz, Iraq's Vice President under

Saddam Hussein. However, this example remained an exception, especially considering Aziz was a Baathist more than a Chaldean Catholic. Aziz also remained faithful to a secular regime that held an iron grip over the Iraqi people, as evidenced by maintaining his dialect (in which he mimicked the Tikriti people), not to mention his tragic fate in prison.

The repercussions of these Middle East alternatives seemed to reshape the Papal policy towards other secular regimes. In the example of al-Assad's Syria, the fear from the chaos that might ensue after the fall of a dictatorial regime was a preachment by the Iraqi example or, worse, an avoidance of the horrifying extremist scenario of the Islamic State. Equally frightening was the possibility of unrestrained chaos that might shatter what was left of the Orient's Christians. Another example was that of Egypt, where a return to traditional military rule was the least of evils, given that the other alternative was a rule by the Muslim Brotherhood — a regime with which Coptic Christians would not have easily coexisted.

In brief, "post-secularism" is a vision that attempts to trail-blaze a third avenue between the two extremes of political Islam on the one side and secular nationalism on the other. It stresses the need to create a neutral space within which both Christians and Muslims can coexist under an umbrella of faith-based human fellowship. It is within this pursuit to unite brothers of faith that the signing of the 2019 Treaty of Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living in Abu-Dhabi should be understood. This is mainly because the Papacy would not condone an Ottoman alternative that confines faith to denominational spheres. The visit of Pope Francis to Ayatollah Al-Sistani, in the course of his journey through Iraq, was a further step in a constant pursuit that championed this common perspective of faith-based fraternity. Of particular relevance is the fact that this papal visit to the "Shiite Pope" in Najaf — the Shiite metropolis of Shiites and their "Vatican" — was a vote of support to constructive spiritual communication with more than a quarter of a billion Shiites in the Islamic world. This visit to such a moderate and reasonable authority — as it has been the case with the papal stopovers in Baghdad, Prophet Abraham's Ur in southern Iraq, Irbil, Nineveh plain, and Mosul in the North — was a practical example of lending support to a diversity that must be rescued, guided by the model of a nation that upholds citizenship that fosters cultural diversity.

Modernity and Reform: from Bahá'u'lláh to the Arab Spring

The gloomy face of the Middle East tragedy, and the demise of its diversity, conceal an image that is much brighter than the three scenes explored earlier, viz. the Zoroastrians, the Kaka'is, and the Afro-Iraqis — scenes that constitute precious patches in the tapestry of the Middle East diversity, and represent the hidden and oft-forgotten spectacle of diversity. However, if we take a closer look at this panorama, we would see other interesting and inspiring hues and shades, with the Baha'is being part of such a hidden and inspiring spectacle of diversity in the annals of the Region. A bicentenary event has just passed unnoticed by the Middle East countries: the Bicentenary of the birth of Mírzá Ḥusayn-'Alí Núrí, surnamed Bahá'u'lláh, who was born in 1817, in Persia (today's Iran). Yet Bahá'ís in several Arab countries celebrated this anniversary in November 2017, cherishing a legacy that inspired the human civilization that characterized Asia and the Middle East.

Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892), the prophet-founder of the Baha'i Faith, and his eldest son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844–1921), the interpreter of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings and his successor, both formed a faith for the revival of Islamic civilization. A goal that also inspired the reformist pursuits of people like Jamal-ud-Din al-Afghani, that charismatic personality whose influence spanned India, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, Egypt, and the rest of the Islamic world. Likewise, they inspired Abdu'l-Rahmán Al-Kawákibi of Syria and Muhammad Abdu and Rashíd Redha of Egypt, Muhammad Hossein Naini, who moved between Iraq and Iran. The endeavors of these reformists aimed at regaining human dignity in the face of tyranny. Chronologically, the Bahá'í teachings on reform were earlier to both what Abdu'l-Rahmán al-Kawákibi presented in his work *طبايع الاستعباد ومصارع الاستبداد* (*Nature of Tyranny and the Devastating Results of Oppression*) and that of Naini in his book *تنبيه الأمة وتنزيه الملة* (*The Awakening of the Community and Refinement of the Nations*). Bahá'u'lláh's *The Most Holy Book* and Abdu'l-Bahá's *The Secret of Divine Civilization* represent a call to reform for Islamic countries and human civilization in general. Such commendable pursuits placed Bahá'u'lláh and Abdu'l-Bahá in the forefront of those who inspired the Middle East's exponents of modernity and its icons of reform.

After 200 years since his birth, the principles of the faith of Bahá'u'lláh remain to be as a starter for alternative thought for all peoples of the Region, given the failure of all promises of the national states to achieve modernity and

development and secure social justice. His Teachings also provide a direction for inclusive citizenship in post Arab Spring era.

Celebrating the Bicentenary of Bahá'u'lláh's birth was an opportunity for educated and cultured circles to re-read Middle East history from a perspective that enables understanding the course that the relationship between religion and the state has taken during the interval between the collapse of the Region's dynasties (the Qajars of Iran, and the Ottomans of Turkey) on the one hand, and the emergence of national states in Iran, Turkey, Syria, Egypt, and remaining countries, on the other. Such understanding should take into consideration the Middle East's movements of reform that called for a shift from the oppressive political patterns to forms of democratic or representational rule.

To me and many of the Arab-speaking world's intellectuals, celebrating the Bicentenary of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh coincided with a landmark intellectual stocktaking of the ultimate failure of the emergence of an international order that gave rise to independent nations during the early decades of the twentieth century. This nation-building process was characterized by internal and external violence. Its consequence was the rise of nationalism in the Middle East, which precipitated a "national model" based on the delusion of ethnonational homogeneity. Subsequent to the failure of this model – with the Arab Spring uprisings and the challenge that faced the paternal authority through the protests championed by youths, feminist movements, civil society and minority groups activists, and the like — there was a dire need for contemplating a new model or "an alternative" that may tackle the challenges of modern times. This intellectual stocktaking assumed particular importance at these times of crises experienced by the Region in the post-ISIS era — an era that witnessed the decimation of diversity both in Iraq and Syria and is characterized by political stalemates, cultural decadence, and social disintegration. After fruitless decades spent in the Arab-Israeli conflict, the stage is now dominated by the Region's contradicting identities that have been shaped by the turnout of a sectarian Sunni/Shiite polarization.

It is my opinion that tracking the Baha'i episode provides a stocktaking of the same sort: The birth of the nation-state, in its contemporary genre in the Middle East, coincided with the emergence of the Baha'i Faith and its growth during a century that started from the middle of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth. Such a stocktaking will reveal that the ideas of Bahá'u'lláh and

the principles of his cause exerted an inspiring influence over many of Mideast leading reformists, particularly in Iran, Egypt and Turkey. It might be argued that the Baha'i Faith took a more practically effective step during the century under review by establishing institutions of democratic rule for its followers, designated as "houses of justice" – currently known as spiritual assemblies. These institutions were established first in areas where sizeable Baha'i communities existed in the religion's birthplace – Iran. In addition, Baha'u'llah's call for more measures that will remain on the wish list of all the Arab world's movements of reform during the subsequent one hundred years, include among others: the separation of religion and state, the full support of religious freedom, the need for harmony between religion and science, the complete equality between men and women. Through his talks, books, and correspondence, these Bahá'í reformatory teachings were elucidated and amplified by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Of special notice is his *Risáleh Madaniyyih* [The Secret of Divine Civilization], a statement that may be classified as a fundamental charter for reform.

The Bahá'í teachings and the roadmap indeed delineate socio-political reform that came into being well ahead of all other Mideast calls and thoughts of reformation. Such Baha'i ideas could have been developed over past decades in a manner consonant with the sequential excogitation of twentieth-century socio-political theories, inclusive of fields ranging from calls to constitutionalism and laying of democratic foundations for the education of women and their equality to men, religious reform, separation of religion and state, and social justice.

Indicative of the active involvement of the Bahá'ís in caring for the fate of Mideast populations and their future were the contacts and interactions that took place between them and the reformists in Iran, Turkey, and Egypt – reformists such as Muhammad Abdu, the Young Turks (the Unionists), the diplomats of the Qajar Dynasty of Iran, as well as ministers of the Ottoman Sultan. The connection between the Baha'i leaders and their contemporary reformists should not be misinterpreted as marginalizing the central role of Baha'is, right from the inception of their Faith until today, in establishing a new society, as well as proving the relevance and importance of modern ideas, such as the concept of universal peace, the abandonment of religious prejudice,

achieving equality between men and women, reconciling religion and science, and the like.

It is quite challenging to determine the influence of the communications between Baha'i leaders and many outstanding Islamic world reformists in the nineteenth century. Yet, the lack of significant references to the Baha'is in the works of those reformists is not to be construed as evidence that such an influence did not exist. In traditional and often intolerant Islamic circles, Muslim reformists would not succeed if their concepts bore any relevance to the Baha'i ideas. Failure would have also been their lot if they carried the additional burden of linking their ideas with a Cause that transcends political boundaries and racial barriers, and embraces diverse nations and different religions, and calls for their unity. This apprehension will remain to be one of the main justifiers of concealing such a part of our contemporary history, not to mention that of its purposeful and sometimes cruel neglect. This is clearly evident in the widely circulated and offending anti-Baha'i literature. The first systematic attempt at concealing the influence of Baha'i reformist thoughts might have been led by Rashid Redha, once owner of Al-Manar magazine, in his attempt to water down the importance of the close relationship of his mentor Muhammad Abdu with 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and produce a revised edition of Muhammad Abdu that complies to his own Salafi disposition.

The *Risáleh Madaniyyih*, [with its English translation bearing the title "*The Secret of Divine Civilization*"] which was authored by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1875, showcases the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh in the wider framework of an alternative outlook, vis-à-vis the despotism that characterized the rule of the Qajar Dynasty in the nineteenth century. 'Abdu'l-Bahá – who never obtained any formal education (as a result of accompanying his father in a journey of exile that started in Baghdad (1853–1863), further to Istanbul (1863) and Edirne (1863–1886), and eventually to Akká (1886–1892) – engaged in the discourses of his time in Turkey (1863–1868), Beirut (where he met Muhammad Abdu in 1887), and hence in Egypt (where he went into lengthy discussions with the most erudite scholars of his era 1910–1913). All along, he was a keen observer of what was available to him from print media in Egypt and Turkey. Of particular example, and during the period of his incarceration in Akká, he was in regular receipt of Al-Urwatu'l-Wuthqá (The Sure Handle) – a periodical that was

circulated from Paris by Jamal-ud-Din Al-Afghani in collaboration with Muhammad Abdu.

The *Risáleh Madaniyyih* is considered a manifesto of social and religious reform that predated the renowned writings of the leading Mideast reformists, whether the Christians of Phoenicia (Syrian and Lebanon) or the Muslims of Iran, Turkey, Egypt, and Iraq. At first, this treatise was published anonymously in Bombay in 1882. Its importance lies in being the second book printed by the Baha'is, following that of Bahá'u'lláh's *Kitáb-i-Iqán, The Book of Certitude* – written in Baghdad in January 1861.

The second phase in the story of the Baha'is spans the years of suffering as far as their relationship with Mideast Islamicate states is concerned. Here, there is an unrecorded or untold Baha'i history that I tracked during my encounters with Baha'is in more than 13 countries, relying on attestations of, and meetings with, Baha'is in Iraq, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Yemen, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Iran, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and Bahrain. Thus a comprehensive panorama of systematic persecution became clear to me, to wit: persecution they suffered under the United Arab Republic that Gamal Abdel-Nasser ruled, the prosecution of the Baha'i Faith (in Egypt and Syria) by virtue of a presidential decree in 1960; in Morocco in 1962 when a death sentence was passed on some Baha'i followers; in addition to their ordeal under the Baathist regime of Iraq, following the enactment of a decree to ban the Baha'i Faith in 1970; and lately their dilemma under Iran's Islamic Revolution of 1979. As to the persecutions that the Baha'is of Yemen are suffering in recent years, it is a series in a continuum of state failure to admit religious diversity and a sign of public space stifling and exclusivity.

Thus Baha'i individuals have been deprived of practicing their religious beliefs in public, declaring their religious identity, or having it recognized officially. As a Lebanese Baha'i once mockingly told me, Baha'i believers are denied all rights – except death! He meant that they are entitled to bury their dead in Baha'i cemeteries. While they are denied the expression of their religious beliefs as Baha'is when alive, they are also excluded from public life. Their place of observing prayers and conducting religious ceremonies is confined to their homes. The situation is that of collective incarceration of a religious minority, whether the state has officially decreed to ban the religion or not.

Apparently, this is the traditional situation in which the Baha'is of Egypt found themselves since the enactment of Nasser's "Presidential Decree 263" in 1960. Similarly, this same situation characterized Baha'i presence in Iraq throughout the period of banning their Faith in Iraq, since the enactment of "Law 105 of 1970," under President Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr and until the time of toppling the Baathist regime at the hands of the American-led invasion that removed President Saddam Hussein in 2003. In like manner, Yemeni security forces prohibited the Baha'is from practicing their beliefs in public and confined this practice to their homes as of 2016, following a wave of mass arrests among them. A mere perusal of the constitutions and institutions of Mideast countries produces one result: the absence of any official recognition of the Baha'i Faith in any Arab or Islamic country, save a symbolic recognition in the Iraqi Region of Kurdistan. This recognition was implicitly granted by admitting a volunteer Baha'i representative to the regional government's Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs.

However, with the development and spread of social media platforms and contemporary technological advancements, a more expansive stage became available to the Baha'is through virtual cyberspace. Hence, we can speak of the third phase in Baha'i history characterized by years of change that, following the Arab Spring, allowed the Baha'is in more than one Arab country to contribute their share in the ongoing conversation on the development of an alternative shared vision. The open letter of the Egyptian Baha'is to their compatriots serves as an introductory statement that presents such a vision of Egypt's future, and a pattern that other peoples in the Region may follow, after the lapse of more than a century of Baha'i presence in Egypt. An in-depth reading of this statement reveals that the Baha'is of Egypt's contribution in the conversation about their homeland's future draws from the collective experience of Baha'i communities worldwide.

While this statement presents the Baha'i teachings as a compass that may guide both vision and clarity in the midst of ideational confusion and conflicting political and material interests, it did not neglect to benefit from the lessons of history. It states that "*there is no shortage of self-interested forces in the world that would prevent us from determining our own future or, alternatively, invite us to voluntarily abdicate this responsibility.*" "*Colonialism, religious orthodoxy, authoritarian rule, and outright tyranny have all played their part in the past,*"

the statement adds, *“and continue to lay bare the gloomy aspect of modernity.”* “[T]he ‘gentler’ force of consumerism and the erosion of morality which it fosters are equally capable of holding us back, under the pretense of making us more free,” it warns. At such a historical juncture, the statement poses fundamental questions that revolve around a pivotal matter: *“Are we to move towards an individualistic, fragmented society, wherein all feel liberated to pursue their own interests, even at the expense of the common good?”*

The statement goes further to fine-tune this “visionary compass” by emphasizing the need to initiate a process of conversation and consultation on the principles that are to inform and reshape society. It goes further to highlight the importance of fashioning a coherent set of principles from various available conceptions, relying on the creative power to unify society. This process, according to the statement, would *“release a fresh measure of... constructive self-energies on which... [the] future depends... [through] a broadly based national conversation — engaging people at all levels... extending to the grassroots of society and drawing on every concerned citizen”*. *“It will be vital,”* it continues, *“that the process would not move too quickly to what is partial and expedient, or be reduced to deals and decisions that aim at the distribution of power among a new elite who would declare themselves as the arbiters of our destiny and future.”*

In revolutionary Tunisia, promising opportunities became available to the Baha’is, to wit: For the first time, they commissioned an official website about the Baha’is in Tunisia in order to introduce the Faith in a manner that refutes the stereotypical portrayals thereof. Pursuing an approach that reflects the post-revolution temperament of Tunisia, the website proposes participation in prevailing social conversations, citing Bahá’í views on themes such as: “my identity ... my humaneness”; building effective citizenry, and equality of women and men. Tunisian Bahá’í, Muhammad Bin Musa explains to me the views of the Baha’is of Tunisia on the challenges that confront the Tunisian society at large during the transition period, and the role that the Baha’is play in support of their compatriots in respect of creating a type of citizenship that would represent a primary outcome of this transition. “We believe,” says Bin Musa, “that our society is not used to diversity and positive coexistence with the different “other.” The “other” — who is different from us in color and race — scares us and poses an imaginary menace to our identity. Therefore, it became a prime concern to the Baha’is in Tunisia to engage in the ongoing

conversations on issues such as citizenship, equality, developing a culture for coexistence that considers all citizens as members of one body — “feeling each other’s sorrows and joys.” “Thus,” he adds, “we contribute to widening the circle of effective citizenships, and in creating awareness of the right of all citizens to live freely, and contribute effectively in enriching common interests and social space, without exclusions of any sort, or claiming any superiority of religion, color, ethnicity, or ideology at the expense of the other.” “The aim is,” he continues, “to see in each other’s background — our Baha’i background included — an enriching asset for the ongoing conversations and a source of inspiration through which we may discover solutions to current-day problems.” “In this connection,” he concludes, “Baha’u’llah says: ‘Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements.’”

The challenges that confront the Tunisian society are, undoubtedly, in need of the combined efforts of all Tunisians in order to meet other dangers, such as the attraction of Tunisian youth to Jihadi Salafism, as a result of their loss of direction and their diminishing hopes in achieving any real change, in addition to their compounded frustrations and disappointment. Therefore, opening up to the diversity that prevails in the Tunisian society — active engagement of civil society and enabling the masses to tap the tools that are conducive to establishing democracy — are all salutary factors for increased youth participation in public affairs that will point the way forward to a path of encouragement.

In the same vein, and as a civil society segment, Baha’is played a role in drafting the Constitution of Tunisia under the dome of its Parliament. In the process, they gave their views and concepts on issues such as citizenship, coexistence, and fundamental freedoms. They were also invited on many instances to present their viewpoints and make presentations thereof at universities and other forums and via TV and radio broadcasts. However, such positive glimmerings are clouded by the predominance of anti-Baha’i stereotype mindsets and prejudices and are limited to the level of post-revolution degree of openness. Such openness did not yet reach the level at which accepting diverse compatriots may be considered or collective baseless apprehensions constrained. The Baha’is officially sought further engagement in such civil society activities by establishing “The Baha’i Society in Tunisia.” Yet, their

application was refused. As Bin Musa explains, the Baha'i Faith, from the Tunisian government's official viewpoint, is not a "heavenly religion." Consequently, the Baha'i Society's founding members instituted a lawsuit at the Administrative Court, challenging the Prime Minister's refusal, and this legal proceeding is still in progress. As it seems, the embrace of official acceptance in Tunisia is delineated by the overall policy on freedom of religion and belief, with the consequences currently being faced by the Baha'is in other Mideast countries such as Iran, Iraq, Egypt, and Yemen. Therefore, the question of non-recognition of the Baha'i Faith places the outcome of Tunisia's transition towards democracy at the same stake.

Due to shrouding the Baha'i minority in obscurity and predominance of a state security policy that considers diversity as a threat to the integrity of the state or public order — a policy that has hitherto characterized the attitude and approach of the post-colonial Mideast state — the Baha'is' circle of influence will not go beyond that of the select few. As such, considerable masses in the Tunisian society, and likewise in other neighboring countries, are under the impression (or illusion) that no diversity of any sort can exist in their homeland — even though the opportunity, which has been witnessed in Tunisia after the revolution, avails the possibilities of creating a new model of citizenship that is open to diversity, or inclusive citizenship. However, the risks of being proscribed and the emergence of racial and denominational tendencies and antagonism towards the *different other*, whether for religious belief or ethno-racial identity, currently remain as insurmountable obstacles. The way out of this impasse is to widen the conceptual horizon of religious freedom and break the circle of exclusivity that prevents accepting the different others — a circle that currently confines certain beliefs, religions, and cultures.

The task at hand is quite noble and requires active combined collaboration and an audacious political will for change. This task rests squarely on the shoulders of elite religious leaders and civil society activists: i.e., the women and men of freedom in all Mideast countries. "We need," as Bin Musa characterizes this task, "to exert a greater effort to cultivate a culture for coexistence among such conflicting identities and find common ground for all of us — Muslims and Baha'is, Arabs and Tamazight, Sunni and Shiites — for the well-being of this country."

The values that the Baha'is champion manifest themselves today as an indispensable set of values for maintaining Mideast diversity, amid dangers that may disintegrate the very fabric of the state — dangers that kept mushrooming for decades in Iraq and Syria. These dangers have also reached Yemen, where chaos has reigned, and state institutions collapsed — not to mention the challenges of instability in Egypt and failure of the state in other countries to maintain diversity where Baha'is have lived for decades much earlier than the colonial pre-independence era, and the establishment of the national state.

Two hundred years after Bahá'u'lláh's birth, the world cherishes the alternative vision that he had advanced for peace, tolerant spirituality, global collaboration, human rights, valuing of reason and science, parliamentary rule, gender equality, and advancement of collective and individual potentialities worldwide. What remains for protagonists of world citizenship and the common destiny of mankind to fight for are embodied in Bahá'u'lláh's blueprint for establishing a world commonwealth to abolish wars and conflicts and adopt an auxiliary international language. Such options are no longer utopian in nature but, rather, feasible choices that all of us, peoples of the Middle East, may endeavor to achieve.

A word in conclusion

Upon asking about his family roots, Mr. Kenneth Bowers, Secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, looked at me and began to relate a fascinating account of his descent from an American WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) family. His family had been endowed with a wealth generated from owning and trading in slaves. As soon as his family espoused the Baha'i Faith a century ago, its traditions and cultures vis-à-vis the cause of equality between whites and blacks were changed entirely. In other words, the spread of the Baha'i Faith in the United States of America was intimately linked to this anti-apartheid movement, and the most outstanding expression thereof was the fact that some of the first mixed marriages of a black man with a white woman in contemporary American history were between Baha'is.

Mr. Bowers went on to talk about the difficulty of achieving equality and combating discrimination, even in a post-modernist American society: Baha'i

interracial meetings were the target of systematic attacks from groups such as the Ku Klux Klan that historically upholds white supremacy and espouses anti-Semitism, racialism, and anti-Catholicism.

I was among the lucky few to have been in the company of Mr. Bowers while he explained the history of building the first Baha'i Temple in the USA (the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár of Wilmette, near Chicago, that is situated on the shore of Lake Michigan). During those unique moments, when we were looking at the cornerstone that 'Abdu'l-Bahá placed by his own hands in 1912 for this astonishing edifice, I observed my colleague's keenness in this tour, the Tunisian architect, Muhammad Bin Musa. I was personally impressed; notably, after I read the description of Shoghi Effendi, in his 1944 book, *God Passes By*, of this Temple, and of the epical visit of 'Abdu'l-Bahá to the United States and Canada in 1912, as well as his interesting encounter with Gibran Kahlil Gibran in New York City (an encounter that was described as "the meeting of clouds"). This meeting resulted in Gibran becoming influenced by the person of 'Abdu'l-Bahá to the degree that was reflected in Gibran's *Jesus, The Son of Man*.

The concept of Mashriqu'l-Adhkár ("Dawning-Place of the Mention of God") is consonant with two fundamental principles of the Baha'i Faith, i.e., the unity of religions and the unity of mankind. This nonagonal building consists of nine sides that support a magnificent dome — all denoting the unity of mankind and the unity of religions under the umbrella of one God.

As I was entering this wondrous building, I was met by a quotation of Baha'u'llah that tells of the global nature of the Baha'i Faith: "*The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens.*" It took eight years for French/Canadian architect Louis Bourgeois to complete the design of this Temple. In his description of the building, he says that the ornamental facings comprise intricate interlocking engravings of the symbols of various religions, as a sign of "the great Bahá'í teaching of unity — the unity of all religions and all mankind." From a metaphorical viewpoint, the structure is a symbolic return to a house of worship that is open to the human race, inclusive of all its believers and faiths — a building that is, through its sublime architectural design, a summoner to unity and oneness as expressed in the quote: "*Ye are all the fruits of one tree and the leaves of one branch.*"

The structure is enveloped in intricate, translucent ornaments, and the material selected was quartz, with a medium of white cement. The result is a surface harder and more enduring than rock, and at the same time carrying intricate decorations as delicate as lace. These precast ornaments were later affixed to their designated places to form the exterior facings of the building.

In like manner, the visions accumulated by the combined power of the weak and oppressed from among the Middle East minorities demonstrate the engagement of all its inhabitants, with the different faiths they come from, in search of salvation and establishment of a diversity-embracing state. Despite suffering large-scale genocide, the Yazidi community proved its vitality and resilience through transforming its social, religious structure, such as the decision of the spiritual Yazidi institution, represented by its leader Baba Sheikh, to welcome back their women survivors, thus contradicting conservative Mideast social traditions. Add to all this the tales of love and heroism enacted by Yazidi youths who offered to marry those survivors as soon as they were liberated from the claws of ISIS. Last but not least was that the youthful survivor, Nadia Murad, won the Nobel Peace Prize, following her outstanding role as a vocal advocate of the Yazidi cause in a manner that surpassed, by leaps and bounds, the norms of her community's traditional religious and social institutions.

On the other hand, the resurrection of Zoroastrianism in Iraqi Kurdistan, and the audacious public disclosure by the Kaka'is of their religious identity, and the revival of the African identity in more than one Middle Eastern country – are all indicative of the inevitable re-emergence of those forces of history that were previously suppressed and left to oblivion.

In retrospect, rekindling the memory of the Armenian genocide proved beyond doubt that justice, even if it arrives late, can sufficiently redress the grievances of the descendants of victims and pave the way for a reconciliation that is indispensable to embark on the arduous path of peace. Likewise, the adherence of the Baha'is to their pacifying values and beliefs, and their involvement in public conversation despite all sorts of persecution that were meted against them for decades, indicate that minorities bear the ferment for change. Indeed, the strength of the weak provides a contribution towards a befitting alternative concept or a third middle choice between nationalism on the one hand and political Islam on the other — an alternative that may be called “a citizenship that induces cultural diversity.”