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towards democracy”**

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Abbas Aroua is an adjunct professor at the Lausanne Faculty of Medicine. A strong advocate for human rights, peace and dialogue among cultures, he is engaged in several non-profit initiatives. In 2002, he founded the Cordoba Foundation of Geneva (CFG) aiming at promoting the exchange between cultures and civilizations in the spirit of Cordoba, and fostering research and debate about peace issues in the world. The CFG is actively involved in research, training and intervention in the fields of violence prevention and conflict transformation. It focuses on the Arab world and Islam in Europe.

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The director of the Cordoba Foundation of Geneva and strong advocate for peace, Abbas Aroua, on the quest for fairness and balance in the Islamic tradition, the need for a secular space in the Arab countries and non-violence as the only effective way towards lasting peace.

You state that Islam is a religion of balance and committed to the search of middle positions. What do you understand by that?

One of the main concepts in the Islamic religion is *wasatiya*, the middle position between the extremes. This concept is complex because it sums up a set of different ideas. For the Prophet Mohammed, “being *wasati*” means being just and fair. *Wasatiya* could be translated into French as “le juste milieu” or “die goldene Mitte” in German. It implies fairness, while the extremes lead to biased positions driven by passions and emotions, not by reason.

But are emotions necessarily bad?

No, but they have to be balanced by reason. This is the idea of *wasatiya*. It differs from the concept of “moderation” in the sense that it keeps away from both extremes, from the low and the high extremes. In the Islamic tradition, the opposite of *wasatiya* is *ghulu*, which is banned. *Ghulu* stems from the fact that the early believers wanted to make more than what was required of them. *Wasatiya* enjoins them not to go beyond what is required in matters of religion and to be balanced. In the Quran, the Muslim community is described as a community of *wasatiya*. Using these two concepts, *wasatiya* and *ghulu*, is a good approach to prevent extremism among religious groups. This is a better way than using terminology like “moderation” or “de-radicalization” because it does not speak to them.

Are you in favor of secular institutions in the Arab countries?

Yes, but let me be clear what I understand by that. I am in favour of secularity, not secularism. Secularity is a state, a space, an environment. Secularism on the other hand is an ideology, a worldview that can be compared to a religion. An example is the French model, where laicism has ideological traits.

How would you design functioning secular institutions?

We have to “de-ideologize” the concept in the Arab world. We do not need secularism, we need secularity. The creation of a secular space in society is very important. What is a secular space? Secular refers to worldly affairs, things that concern our everyday life and not the hereafter. In this logic, a secular space is a place where people discuss and manage their worldly life, their worldly affairs. This space should be open to all ideologies, religions or worldviews, especially in societies with a big religious diversity, where a secular space is a good way to deal with the conflicts that may arise.

Is there a country in the Arab world where we can find a “secular space” as you describe it?

I cannot think of a nation where this concept has been introduced. At the beginning of the Arab Spring, we were enthusiastic about the situation in countries like Tunisia and Egypt. But now the security approach has returned to these countries and with it the control of society by the military. Unfortunately, there is not much space for dialogue. For example, Iraq badly needs secularity: the country has a large majority of Muslims divided into Shia and Sunni as well as other religious minorities. The Iraqi State is controlled by sectarian groups, mainly Shia that are remotely controlled by Iran. The atrocities experienced by Sunni Iraqis are the main reason for the birth and expansion of the ISIS. Creating a secular space is a necessity in such a context. Without it, the country will continue to be sucked in by the spiral of violence and stuck in the current civil war for decades. It is interesting to observe that even religious leaders from both Sunni and Shia communities are demanding secularity for Iraq.

Religious leaders recognize the importance of a common secular space?

Yes, and this is because they see secularity simply as a mechanism to deal with the sectarian diversity in the country and do not see it as a foreign ideological intrusion, as a concept introduced by ideologists influenced by the West. These religious leaders are confronted to a situation where you have faith-based parties and movements that are fighting against each other. This confrontation is often violent and the death toll is enormous. They need a space that frees the political arena from sectarian considerations and focus on citizenship.

What lesson can we learn from the Arab Spring?

The Arab Spring and the regression that happened afterwards showed that the use of non-violence in order to change the political system effectively is the only way. Non-violence is both an ethical and effective approach that brings lasting peace. Maybe you can settle a conflict by force, but you are never able to transform it.

How do you see the future of the Arab countries?

This region is still in a dark tunnel and we do not know how long it will be. But the people broke the fear barrier and liberated themselves. These changes to the better are irreversible. I am optimistic: the peoples' will is going to prevail in the end. The overall trend is positive and things are moving in a good direction. There are some backlashes, but the Arab countries are slowly taking the path towards democracy. What the future will bring we do not know. What is sure is that the model of the nation-state will not prevail forever. Some big communities in the Arab world are transnational; they do not recognize the artificial borders. These borders must become looser. In the future, the peoples in West Asia and North Africa will find another configuration able to guarantee a sustainable peace.

Interview: Joël Frei, ICP

Further readings:**Secularism in international politics, Jean-Nicolas Bitter**

<http://cordoue.ch/publications/papers-a-reports/item/391-secularism-in-international-politics>

L'Islam et la culture de la médiatude (wasatiya), Abbas Aroua

<http://cordoue.ch/arouas-blog/item/332-1%E2%80%99islam-et-la-culture-de-la-m%C3%A9diatude>

The Quest for Peace in the Islamic Tradition, Abbas Aroua

<http://cordoue.ch/images/stories/pdf/Books/Q4P.pdf>