

Speak at CEMOFPSA Conference  
Middle East, fragmented societies, What future?  
H. E. Msgr. Michel Sabbah  
Latin Patriarch Emeritus of Jerusalem

*Thanks and recognition for the work of the FPSC*

I would like first to express my gratitude to the Fundación Promoción Social de la Cultura, and to her President Pilar Lara Alén. With this Foundation indeed, the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem had a very fecund and active partenariat in Palestine and Jordan, in educational and social fields. The action of the FPSC extends as well to other countries of the Middle-East and is one of the sincere actions for the development of the countries or communities with which and for which it works.

### **Fragmentation or unity**

1. The main theme proposed to our reflection in this Conference is: “Middle East fragmented societies, what future?” Indeed, our Middle East is “fragmented”: many countries, and within these countries, many ethnical identities, many religions, and within the one religion many confessions. In the Arab Middle-East societies two religions, Islam and Christianity, are present and in the today’s Middle East, after the creation of the State of Israel, the three monotheistic religions exist side by side and have their different respective role and influence on the society.

Islam and Arabic language and culture are the basic common factor in the Arab societies of the Middle-East. At the same time, the potential of fragmentation is big given its religious and ethnical pluralism.

### **Internal and external factors of fragmentation**

2. Religion, (the two religions, Islam and Christianity), was and is still a factor of division. Within the same religion, Islam has its division mainly into Sunni and Shi’ah, a powerful factor of division; within Christianity, the many confessions create a confessional individualistic mentality impeding a unified strong Christian contribution to their societies.

But besides the internal potential of fragmentation, we must mention the external factors of fragmentation imposed on the today Middle East, since its birth, after the 1<sup>st</sup> World War (1914-1918) and the fall of the Ottoman Empire. The Arab world was then intentionally fragmented by the Great Powers. Instead of creating one political entity in the Arab Middle-East, many entities were created and put under British or French mandates, with the intention to make place for another new fragmentation in the region, the Jewish national home, today the state of Israel. Moreover, it seems today that the existence and the survival of the state of Israel seemed to impose this situation of fragmentation among its neighbors, considering a strong Arab unity as an existential threat.

So was the birth: a fragmented entity. Then the modern Arab history begun its course, under a certain pressure to remain fragmented. Nevertheless, in the Western world, friendly complementary relations have since the First World War developed with the Middle-East it has created.

Besides the political line, the human rights sense in the West has given birth to many organizations which worked in the Middle East with sincere will, and sometimes in opposition to the politics of colonialism, started with the end of the Ottoman Empire and yet in action. The existence of these Associations or NGO’s, as the FPSC and many others, had brought, besides, their direct support in educational, social and human fields, an important aspect of dialogue between peoples, and a model of positive cooperation between West and East. Indeed

in the general atmosphere of confrontation between East and West, and the colonization aspect of the West in the East, the presence of many of these entities says through their sincere support, that the “others”, the West, are not all enemies; they are not all colonizers. Many of them are rather friends, and real supporters for human rights and the dignity of the human person, beyond national or religious considerations.

### **3. Islamist movements**

Islamist movements were born, first as a reaction to the yet non stable situation of the modern Arab States, that replaced the old system of Caliphate, and the concept of al-Umma, and, second, as a reaction to the foreign domination. This domination was first explicit in the mandatory regimes, then it became more or less manifest in a world global politics imposing foreign directives upon the local regimes. Today in every country of the Middle-East this tension between the regimes and their peoples, or between the regimes and the Islamist movements, is there, more or less explicit, more or less contained, and remains an unavoidable element within the evolution of the society.

### **4. The Christians of the Middle East**

Christian Arabs are rooted in the following countries: Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Israel, Egypt and Sudan. They are there in the lands of their origins and roots. The Churches' languages reveal the various original ethnic groups in the area, the Copts of Egypt, the Aramaic-Syrians of Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, (the Maronites are part of this family), the Armenians dispersed in all Arab countries, and the Greek communities stemming from the time of the Roman Byzantine empire (called in Arabic Roum, in reference to the Roman empire with whom the Arabs came into military confrontation).

Very quickly all these Churches, without losing their own ethnical language, especially in literature, adopted the Arabic language which became the common language of all Christians of the Middle East. Only Syriac and Aramaic (and Armenian of course) are still, and in a partial measure, spoken as mother languages, besides Arabic. In the today Arab Middle East countries, everyone has the conscience to belong to the Arab world.

Some would like to present Christians as Christians only, without belonging to a people or a land. It is simply part of the process of fragmentation, and in contradiction with the nature of every human person who belongs normally to a people and to a land.

The Middle East Council of Churches represents all these Churches, gathered in four families: the Greek Orthodox family (Patriarcates of Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem and the Archbishop of Cyprus), the Orthodox Oriental family (the Coptic Patriarcate of Alexandria, the Syrian Patriarcate of Antioch, and the Armenian Catholicossate of Cilicia, with actual seat in Antelias (Lebanon)); the Catholic family with its seven Patriarcates (Alexandria for the Coptic Catholics, Antioch for the Syrian Catholics, for the Maronites, and the Greek Catholics, the Armenian catholic Patriarch, the Chaldean Patriarch of Babylon, in Bagdad, and the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem); and finally the Protestant family with various churches or ecclesial communities (the main among them are the Anglicans, the Lutherans and the Prebsyterians). Another body, the Council of the Catholic Patriarchs of the East gathers all the Catholics of the region. These two councils represent all Christian Arabs in all Arab countries (Middle East, Gulf, Sudan and North Africa).

### **5. What future?**

The Council of the Catholic Patriarchs of the East, has published recently, in this year 2009, the 10<sup>th</sup> general Pastoral Letter: “*Christian Arabs and the contemporary challenges*” addressed to all Christians in the Middle East. The Letter has three chapters, the first, the present situation in our Arab countries, the second the Christian reality in these countries and the third presents a vision for the future. Some elements of this vision are the following:

Religion is a basic and necessary component of the society in the Middle East. Hence the necessity of a true religious education, making clear that the essence of every religion is to love God and all God's creatures. The criterion of a true religious behavior is a right behavior towards the other: As Jesus said: "Treat the others as you would like them to treat you" (Mt 7:12). Religion should not be a barrier but a bridge among people. Until today, religion, supported by a tribal concept and behavior, was and is a factor of separation, whether between religions, or within the branches of the same religion.

Another important aspect, in a religious education, especially in a situation of conflict as that in which we are living in the Middle East: Religion cannot be turned into a principle of violence. Hence the necessity of distinguishing, in all religions of the region, between true religious behavior and religious extremism that, in the name of God, excludes or kills the other.

In a conflict situation, one has to be educated, or to educate oneself to see with the eyes of the other. In the same time, one must have a sense of justice, of what is due to the other, in what he is himself oppressor or oppressed. Forgiveness and reconciliation can only be founded on truth, sincerity and respect for others' rights.

## **Conclusion**

The new Middle-East was born, as already said fragmented, and pressure was maintained and is still maintained upon it to remain fragmented. The internal factors of fragmentation help of course this external pressure aiming to have a whole region fragmented instead of becoming one united. The elements of this fragmentation are: the political lay parties, the Muslim religious parties, the Christian Arabs in search of their role in their Arab societies and their contribution to the general evolution of the region, plus the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the State of Israel whose place and role in the region Israel has not defined.

Recently, under the Bush Administration there was a talk about the remodeling of a New Middle-East, which meant the creation of new geographical and ethnic borders, that is to say more fragmentation in what was already fragmented after the 1<sup>st</sup> World War.

To this rather negative past, Obama's speech, few days ago, on June 4<sup>th</sup> in Cairo, seems to bring a new historic turn:

*"The relationship between Islam and the West includes centuries of co-existence and co-operation, but also conflict and religious wars. More recently, tension has been fed by colonialism that denied rights and opportunities to many Muslims, and a Cold War in which Muslim-majority countries were too often treated as proxies without regard to their own aspirations. Moreover, the sweeping change brought by modernity and globalization led many Muslims to view the West as hostile to the traditions of Islam... This cycle of suspicion and discord must end.... I have come here to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world; one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect".*

Although Obama spoke only in the name of the USA, it is a first formal declaration to put an end to a secular situation of military confrontation and clashes between East and West, Islam and Christianity, and it is a first formal call for a new beginning in the relations of the Middle East and the West. Indeed, since the rise of Islam, the relations between East and West, or Islam and Christianity, was one of military confrontation. In the first phase of the Confrontation, that is to say until almost the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the weakening of the Ottoman Empire, the power was in the hands of the East. Then it passed to the West, and the Western colonialism in the East began under various forms, and continues until today.

The speech of President Obama marks these past of confrontation in both ways: *"The relationship, he says, between Islam and the West includes centuries of co-existence and co-operation, but also conflict and religious wars"*. And important is his new appeal: *"This cycle of suspicion and discord must end.... I have come here to seek a new beginning between the*

*United States and Muslims around the world; one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect”.*

We hope indeed, thanks to the efforts of so many dialogues, that already started between the Moslem Arab world and the West, already before Obama’s speech, and with this new call to a sincere cooperation, that a New Middle East can be born, as its peoples want it, and not as others want it for them, a New Middle East, in which the Christian Arab presence also, although slowly dwindling, because of emigration and the political and social instability of the region, can as well play a more efficient role in the creation of a healed, stable, united and independent Middle East.

Madrid, 9<sup>th</sup> of June 2009.