

Georges Corm: Arabs Stuck in a Guantanamo of Thought

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Georges Corm (b. 1940) is a Lebanese economist and financial expert who specializes in the Middle East and Mediterranean countries. He studied constitutional law and economics at the University of Paris and graduated from the Political Science Institute in Paris (Sciences Po).

Corm served as finance minister in the 1998-2000 Salim Hoss cabinet. He is a professor at St. Joseph University in Beirut and taught previously at the Lebanese University and the American University of Beirut.

His publications include many studies and a number of books and articles in Arabic, English, and French including *East-West: An Imaginary Divide*, *Contemporary Lebanon: History and Society*, *The Question of Religion in the 21st Century* for which he won the Phénix Award and *History of the Middle East From Antiquity to the Present Day*.

-Antoine Fleyfel (AF): Geopolitics is present in most of your work, can you define it for us?

-Georges Corm (GC): Geopolitics is a compound word meaning: an approach to situations that are often conflictual in nature having to do with the geographical location of a nation-state and with the essence of its body politic. It combines, therefore, a geographical approach with a political approach.

-AF: What can this approach add to an understanding of the Arab world and its problems?

-GC: I see developments in the Arab world as connected to the geographical conditions of the Arab region, in addition to Iran and Turkey – if we adopt the idea of a “Middle East.”

The region has three features that elicit foreign intervention. One, it is the birthplace of the three monotheistic religions that have spread globally. Two, it has a strategic location. And three, it has a lot of oil which is coveted by the big and rich colonial powers.

There is another problem. Unlike the Turks and the Ottomans, the Arabs, after the decline of the Abbasid Dynasty (750-1258), no longer played a role in the political history of the world. The Persians and the Turks became masters of the region.

When the Ottoman Empire collapsed, Arab societies felt orphaned after they had been used to living in the shadow of the Muslim caliphate. These societies lacked any experience in self-rule.

In addition, Arabs were divided between British and French colonial rule and the Zionist entity was planted in the heart of the Arab world dividing the Arab east from the Arab west.

The Arabs became dispersed and fragmented after the end of the Nasserist era which had united Arabs at one point. Each Arab country allied itself with an external power instead of forming an alliance among Arab regimes.

As such, the Arab region witnessed a power vacuum which attracted at the time the Soviet Union and the United States. After the collapse of the USSR, Iran emerged as a significant regional power hostile to the US, while divisions among Arab regimes persisted.

Now we are witnessing the rise of Turkish power. It is not clear whether this rise is part of an agreement with the US whereby Turkey acts as a proxy for US interests, or whether it is a self-propelled movement of Turkish society.

-AF: Is there a link between philosophy or philosophical methodology and geopolitics?

-GC: The link is direct and fundamental but unfortunately, most specialists in International Politics and International Relations seldom give adequate attention to the role that the philosophical understanding of the world plays in shaping policies of world powers.

Often, colonialism and settlements hide behind noble goals that are philosophical in nature. When Europeans invaded the world, it was in the name of people's religious enlightenment, so they would be exposed to Christianity.

In the 19th century, conquest was carried out in the name of civilization, to help people whose civilizations were not advanced. Marxist thought also contributed to supporting this kind of philosophical rationale. Karl Marx believed that "backward" countries needed to open up to modern capitalism in order to hasten the process of transformation from a bourgeois capitalist system to a proletariat socialist system.

We have two philosophical sources, Hegel and Marx, and together they rationalized colonial campaigns. Lately, we've had the neoconservatives in the US like Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush who invaded Iraq in the name of democracy.

Philosophical rationales deployed by countries that wage wars of conquest need to be deconstructed because such endeavors always require some kind of philosophical or religious justification.

-AF: What are the major components of your thought?

-GC: I wanted to address two complementary issues. First, my studies in Paris made me keenly aware of the European claim that, unlike other people, they possess wisdom, philosophy, and humanism. I was shocked by this kind of narcissism among European nations. That long road led me to write my book *Europe and the Myth of the West: The Construction of a History*.

Second, as I dove deeper into contemporary Arab culture, it became clear to me the extent to which it is dependent on Western thought. Also, we, as Arabs, lack knowledge of Chinese thought or Indian thought or the philosophies of non-Western civilizations.

We are sort of locked in a face-to-face encounter with the West – Europe and the US – that puts us in a kind of prison, an intellectual Guantanamo of sorts. Because the idea of

philosophical independence, advocated by our friend Nassif Nassar, for example, has no momentum in the Arab world.

Even Islamist movements which are supposed to represent the most hard-line positions are in the end a product of a pathological relationship with Western philosophy and a Western world-view.

What do we see among the Arab intellectual elite? Either complete prostration before the Western cognitive view of the world or a kind of hysterical rejection of it. There is indeed a state of subordination to the Western system of thought in the Arab world.

I have been calling for an end to this state of dependence and subordination in order to establish an Arab cognitive system of knowledge that takes into consideration our history and builds an epistemological system on it.

For example, the most important question that no one has explored is, why did the rule of the Arabs or Arab power end? As long as we do not have an answer to this question, we cannot build a better future. How did Arab conquests that built Muslim civilization end up with the Arabs locked out of history?

Since the destabilization of the Ottoman Empire in the last century, Arabs have faced an identity crisis between adherence to a religious legacy and entering secular history.

The battle still rages at the heart of the Arab revolutions which we are witnessing today. They can be summed up as a competition between the concept of a civil secular state and a state governed by religious authority.

-AF: Since we brought up this issue, how do you read the problem of secularism and sectarianism in Lebanon?

-GC: I believe that Lebanon played a pioneering role in the 19th century especially after the sectarian massacres that awakened the Lebanese mind. But the Mutasarrifiyya system which governed Mount Lebanon after the sectarian massacres established political sectarianism for the first time in Lebanon's history.

Then the French mandate established sects as intermediary entities between citizens and the state in public law. After that, the national reconciliation document in the Taif Agreement tried to refine sectarianism by reformulating it in a more balanced way among the sects.

We are still prisoners of a sectarian culture and it is a devastating culture because it makes the Arab individual look at the world through a religious, sectarian prism instead of a secular one.

When the Lebanese Civil War began in 1975, the Palestinian cause was the central issue. The war therefore should not have turned into a Muslim-Christian conflict. If it were presented in the right way, it would not have fed sectarian sensibilities, because what was being contested was the armed Palestinian presence in Lebanon.

It is sad to say that the side which had declared war on the armed Palestinian groups back then is ready today for a permanent settlement of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. They are also ready for the entire Western-Saudi or “moderate Arab” approach to the Palestinian cause.

I have always argued that we often lose what we gain through resistance, when this resistance takes on a religious character.

The Palestinian cause is not about religion, it is about occupation and colonization. If Buddhists happened to colonize Palestine, they would have faced fierce resistance. Even if Turkish or Iranian Muslims occupied Palestine, I think the Palestinians would have risen up.

Reducing the Palestinian cause to a religious struggle undermines the achievements made through resistance.

-AF: What are the prospects of the Arab Spring in your opinion?

-GC: There is no doubt that major historical events took place that are self-generated. The Arab people did not revolt because of a foreign conspiracy as some would like to argue.

Nevertheless, Western superpowers were quickly struck by a new colonial fever. They were aided by the conservative forces hostile to political modernity and human freedom, which we used to call the Arab reactionary forces in the past.

The Turks also entered the scene presenting an Islamist model as a guide to the Arab revolutions. This of course will alienate these revolutions and we have seen painful results in Libya, Syria, and Yemen. It remains to be seen how far the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia will go.

In any case, revolutions come in circles and a revolutionary circle opened up in the Arab world. But it is hard to predict where it will end up.

I always say the French Revolution broke out in 1789 and bore its final fruit a century later, when the third republic was established, monarchical rule ended, and republican principles were secured.

The revolutionary cycle takes a long time and it is not a magical wand that changes everything all at once. I think we are at the beginning of the road.

Falling into religious and sectarian discussions is bad publicity for the revolutions. Viewing what happened in Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen from a sectarian prism is wrong.

Analyzing in the absence of an independent and philosophical thought system is a pathology. We analyze according to the tools and style of Western propaganda, the Western academy, and Western media, and we do so from a sectarian point of view.

A few months before invading Iraq, the US started to spread the view that the issue in Iraq is that a Sunni minority persecuted a Shia majority. The similarly simplistic way in

which the situation in Syria is being depicted today is highly regrettable and will lead to doom and disaster.

We should abandon analysis based strictly on viewing Arab people as religious and sectarian beings. Let's examine the real factors on the ground, such as issues of corruption, social justice, and the rentier economy that perpetuates tyrannical regimes.

The path of democracy indicates that democracy relies on destroying the rentier economy. And unfortunately, most Arab economies are rentier economies.