What is Arab & Middle Eastern in a Philosophy of Nonviolence?
Lecture by Chibli Mallat
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Summary by Tasnim Chaaban

Dr. Chibli Mallat, a lawyer and a law professor, gave a lecture at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, in which he presented his recent book What is Arab & Middle Eastern in a Philosophy of Nonviolence? The book was described by IFI Director Dr. Tarek Mitri as a book that “addresses very timely issues” which pertain to violence, and transition. The book attempts at thinking philosophically of the topics of revolution, constitutionalism and justice in one coherent thought that diminishes the use of violence in the political life, be it national or domestic.

In the introduction of the book, Mallat tries to reinvent a philosophy of history that infuses theory and practice. He then states that the non-violent movements formed a paradigmatic shift in the history of revolutions, namely those in the Middle East. Further, the non-violent movements started with the Cedar Revolution in Lebanon (2005-2006) and the Green Revolution in Iran (2009) that according to Mallat were not successful. However, these revolutions were expressed in a series of movement in which massive popular resistance marched in the streets against authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen and Syria, leading up to the historical moment of 2011.

Mallat split the general argument of the book into three “moments” in which the success of his non-violent philosophy is explained: the revolution, constitutionalism and finally justice and accountability. While violence is an inherent part of a dictatorship, his definition of non-violence addressed a philosophical sense of advancing political interest and ambitions without shedding blood.

According to Mallat, the first moment, being the revolution, can remain nonviolent so long as the dictator is in power. Nevertheless, the non-violent philosophy is presented by a paradox of the moment after the success of the revolution. After the fall of the dictator, maintaining the state’s monopoly of violence lies in the installation of the new state’s constitution. Further, Mallat explains that the constitutional moment “must convey violence by the rule of law represented by the working constitution and judge who maintain social peace.” His solution to the paradox would be the element of time along with the judicial accountability and democratic institutions, which he claimed as part of the philosophy.

Mallat also discussed the distribution of power along the center and the periphery. Further, he claimed it as of great importance that the periphery should not be a mere
representation of the people alone, as in democratic systems; but also it should have the ability to exercise power in the center. This distribution of power shall result in a new form of constitutionalism, which thinks and focuses on the civil society rather than the state. He also mentioned the two dangers that constitutionalism faces in the Middle East, being religion as a supra-law, and sectarianism in the political system.

After the presentation of his book, a discussion was held in which Mallat answered several questions, some of which are: the definition of violence, the role of the civil society in the non-violent revolution, the relationship between the dictators in the Middle East to the international powers, the call for accountability, be it regional or international, the role of the economical system in the Middle Eastern revolutions, and the Cedar Revolution’s failures and achievements.