The relationship between communal loyalties and political choices is a thorny issue more than ever before. Many are constantly and forcefully confronted with the arduous task of defining this relationship in the difficulties of their daily lives. There are situations, sometimes dramatic, and people that remind them of the primacy of communal loyalties.

The nation-states that emerged from the Ottoman Empire, including modern Turkey, came as a rejection of the Ottoman past. But emerging national states in the Arab world had little no distinctive national experience to forge strong identities. In Lebanon, to mention an exception, had a specific foundational myth that others did not have.

The patriotic bond cemented opposition to the Ottoman central and oppressive power and later to dominating European powers. Thus in the struggle for, and achievement of, independence was established the pact of citizenship, superseding the former *dhimma* pact.

But the milletist, or self-enclaved, attitudes did not fade away. In the search for independence and liberation, Islamic self-awareness was intensified. A sometimes-violent self-assertion gained visibility and appeal against the failure of modern, more or less secular, independent and authoritarian governments. In some instances, this has led to anti-Christian feelings. It was said, and believed, that the colonial powers, and national governments later, gave a preferential treatment to Christians and used them to benefit their domination. No matter how questionable these perceptions are, there will always be people, today like yesterday, who cannot, or do not dare, oppose those who make them angry. They look unconsciously for substitutes.

In short, the opening of the twentieth century suggested that a new society was in the making yet it was ruled by an old state. More than a hundred years later, we see old societies in new states. Primordial ties, those of kin, ethnicity and religion seemed to command more loyalties than civic relations.

The force of communal identities among Christians is not for them alone a problem to wrestle with. One ought to remember that loyalty to one’s religious community deserves a more careful scrutiny. It is certainly a function of a combination of a historical memory and spiritual impulse. But it is strengthened in times of pressure, or oppression against one’s identity. Loyalty to a given religion however should not be assessed only in relation to critical situations. The strength of what binds a
religious community together is determined by a long-term tendency to seek comfort and security. It has a protective function against abrupt and risky change.

But religious identity and communal identity are not one and the same. Religious institutions are influential in playing social and political roles even when fewer numbers of people believe or practise the religion that such institutions represent. In some extreme cases, people fight in the name of religions in which they ceased to believe. There are tensions and conflicts that have a religious past but their religious content is of no significance. Religions in which people have little, or no faith continue to define communities in which they have much faith.

Everywhere, and the Arab World is no exception, meaningful identities are multiple. Nevertheless, when the various needs, material or spiritual, are being met or expressed in one identity, the borders between communal loyalties are mutually enforced than mutually balanced. They create closed communities with exclusive memories activated or reinvented. Difference in community size becomes an issue of a minority threatened by a majority.

It is never superfluous to draw, in theory and practise, a distinction between communal identity and religious identity. Such a distinction is perceptive of our present realities, although more obvious in some societies than others. It is all the more necessary, for when communities identify themselves or are identified exclusively by their religion, situations become exclusive. Religion speaks for the some of the deepest feelings and sensitivities of individuals and communities, carries deep historical memories and may appeal to universal loyalties.

This distinction does not, in itself, resolve the tension between communal identity and citizenship. We live in a region where the tradition of civil politics remains weak. For quite some time, it will not be easy to subordinate familiar identifications in favour of a commitment to a civil order. A primordial discontent strives more deeply and is satisfied less easily than a civic aspiration.

But how then could we foster citizenship? The starting point is the affirmation that it is an encounter of persons as equal actors in society and polity who, while influenced by culture, religion and ethnicity, cannot be reduced to the roles
assigned to them in the name of communal identities, loyalties and perceived interests. Citizenship is in fact a claim to personal significance, based on individual
Genuine citizenship cannot coexist with political homogenization of communities. Political plurality within communities promotes citizenship as it allows trans-communal political loyalties. This cannot be achieved unless there is a renewal of political élitists, the emergence of those who lead rather than dominate and who, while recognizing the strength of communal ties, promote civic politics.

Much of what is said in Lebanon on Syrian Christians is conditioned by Lebanese political considerations. Power relations in Lebanon mirror those in Syria. Irrespective of their histories, friends of the Syrian regime interpret the present Syrian situation in terms of a long-standing conflict between the Sunni Muslim majority and those they see as minorities at risk, jointly or in parallel. However, such an interpretation is rarely explicit in the words of politicians, whose support of Assad is said to be motivated by their opposition to an international conspiracy targeting, for various and changing reasons, a so-called secular regime, resistant to Israeli domination.

Above all, the popular uprising in Syria is portrayed as a confrontation between secularists and Islamists. The secular character of the Syrian regime is overstated while its communal and despotic features are ignored. From early times, the Syrian uprising was over-islamicized. Mainstream traditional Islam is, at times, confused with Salafism, often associated with extremist and terrorist movements, and the plural character of the Syrian opposition is denied. In times of excessive militarization, the weight of armed force overshadow sociological importance. Ignorance of Syria’s history, as well as weak knowledge of its present day realities, favors generalizations. One of them is the claim that all religious minorities, Christians included, support Assad and recognize in him their protector from bigotry and discrimination, and their defender against attempts of radical Islamist movements to seize power and subdue them. The present times are times of uncertainty and fear, often real and, at times, engineered. We observe a hardening of minority-centered attitudes, rooted in historical memory, often reinvented. There is also a degree of social isolation, imposed by the dictatorial regime for fifty years. In the case of Christians, we cannot ignore a retrogression to a sort of millet condition, where Christian communities are granted certain rights and Churches
limited freedom and prerogatives in managing some of their “internal affairs” in exchange for total loyalty and acquiescence to the deprivation of their political rights and parts of their civil rights. In other words, they lower expectations and accept minimal rights and perceive them, in certain cases, as privileges. They tend to overestimate policies made, or measures taken, by Bashar Assad that have expanded a little the formerly narrow space made available under Hafez Assad, in particular in the areas of religious freedom and free economic activity.

Uncertainty and fear are also exacerbated by intensified repression, mounting influence of extremist Islamic groups and amplification of their propaganda, displacement, fragmentation, and the loosening of ties of neighborhood, friendship and solidarity across communal barriers.

However, there are a few local initiatives, in the cities and in rural areas, as well as NGO initiatives outside Syria, that aim at preventing communal problems, counteracting fears and establishing a sort of civil safety net.

But times of uncertainty and fear are also times of change. The tension of turning victims into actors may not be resolved in the near future. Empowerment of civic forces on the way to a political solution in Syria deserves greater attention. They cannot be dismissed because of their military weakness or inadequate political representation. It is also the political solution itself which would promote citizenship if it moves away from the consecration of territorial and communal divisions. Recognizing the present fragmentation and communalization is understandable but designing a political system that mirrors them and assumes they are never-changing realities is another. There were many Syrians who took pride in their sense of national identity contrasted with the strength of communal identities in Lebanon. It is hoped that voices suppressed will not be voices silenced. In the midst of chaos and destruction, the emergence of forces striving towards citizenship and national unity may become rather than an impossible dream a principle of hope.

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