FROM THE EDITOR

Spring can be brutal on the memory of those not blessed with forgetfulness. Forty years ago, on April 13, 1975, the Republic of Lebanon began its descent into chaos and violence reminiscent of the ongoing carnage gripping Syria today. April 11 of this year also marked the seventieth anniversary of Robert Clary's liberation from Buchenwald, coinciding almost to the day with *Yom Ha-Shoah* Holocaust Remembrance Day. In 1945 Clary was nineteen. For those not old enough to know him, he was "Frenchie" in the mid-1960s American television sitcom *Hogan's Heroes*. Today Clary is the last living original cast member of the series. In his television persona, he was a Jew in the role of a POW in a comedy about a World War II German Prison Camp. As an actor, he embodied the beauty and dignity of the human spirit; a former victim making light of the brutality and inhumanity of his former captors, barely twenty years after the trauma of Buchenwald.

Likewise this year's April marked the centenary of other early twentieth century traumas; the Armenian Genocide, and the *Shato d'Sayfo*, "the Year of the Sword" as the mass slaughter of the Assyrian Christian population of the Ottoman Empire is known in Aramaic. But our tidy modern world's memory seems oblivious to telltale signs of an early twenty-first century mimicking the inaugural brutalities of the twentieth. In the Middle East, a nascent "Islamic State" has dreams of empire seeking to reclaim a lost "Golden Age" to be rebuilt on gallows and skulls.

Yet the prevailing assessments in academic circles, and the dominant public and media discourses on ISIS dismiss the phenomenon as transient, delusional, anomalous, and therefore doomed to failure; a "JV team" in President Obama's telling, or just a "terror organization" and a "self-declared Islamic State" in media and academic depictions averse to naming a state by the name it arrogates to itself. Yet no such denigrations of state appellations apply to, say, the "so-called" Kingdom of Belgium, the "so-called" Islamic Republic of Iran, or the "so-called" United States of America. Some even claim that a brighter "secular" paradigm is extant in the Middle East's future; a "secular nationalism" model winnowed from the region's early twentieth century experiment with modern statehood; a happy alternative and panacea as it were to the current turmoil. This optimism is shortsighted, unwarranted, dangerous, and historically baseless. It is reminiscent of Pollyannas gone astray in 2010, hailing the events formerly known as the "Arab Spring" as the dawn of a new era of freedom and democracy.

To suggest that an exercise such as ISIS is based on illusion and delusion, and may therefore prove to be ephemeral, ignores the flimsiness of "secular nationalism" and "state", and the tenacity and resilience of both empire and religion in the Middle East. By osmosis, this attitude also devalues the tenacity, resilience, seriousness, and competence of ISIS itself. Furthermore, suggesting that "secular nationalism" as a principle and as a basis of government and a source of political legitimacy as such may trump the ISIS vision and model *also* ignores the staying power of *both* religion and empire in the Middle East.

"Secular Nationalism" and the "Pretense of Secular Nationalism" are not necessarily synonymous. The former *may* be secular; the latter only *parades* secular "ostentations." And so, the following is perhaps worth consideration:

1- ISIS may indeed be the *norm* in the *longue durée* of Middle Eastern history, rather than the anomaly or exception;
2- the "secular state", and indeed the current crumbling Arab-defined "state system" in the Middle East, is the *exception* to the rule, and may not have the staying power once attributed to it. In other words, places like Syria, or Jordan, or Iraq and the rest, are modern inventions that never achieved legitimacy; ISIS on the other hand reflects and projects both "legitimacy" and "authenticity" in the eyes of many Muslim Middle Easterners.

It is true that Muslim majority countries (or *some* Muslim majority countries) in the Arab-defined Middle East *might* have trotted out "secular ideals" with great zeal throughout the twentieth century. But to suggest that, say, the Baath in Syria and Iraq, or that Nasserism in Egypt, or that the *Jamaahiriyya* (socialist populism) of Qaddafi's Libya, or that the monarchies of Morocco and Jordan (who incidentally flaunt their Kings' direct descent from the Prophet Muhammad) somehow draw their "political legitimacy" and therefore their staying power from secular (as opposed to religious) principles and traditions, paints too bright and optimistic a picture of realities that may point to darker corners of Middle Eastern societies and Middle Eastern history.

Government in places like Iraq, Syria, Egypt and the rest in the Arab-defined Middle East, in spite of their proclaimed "secular" attributes (which may be meaningful *more so* to Western audiences than to locals) remain governments of deeply religious societies and political cultures, drawing legitimacy chiefly from religion; from Islam to be exact.

It is politically soothing for Westerners—and Western academics in particular—to diminish the centrality of religion in Middle Eastern lives. Yet the political realities

of the Middle East remain intimately twined to religion. An illustration from the annals of the "secular" Arab Nationalist Baath Party may be instructive:

In the mid-1970s, during one of the fitful pinnacles of Arab-nationalist fervor, which was then dismantling the Lebanese state—perhaps the region's *only* non-Muslim entity outside of Israel at the time—Syria's Baathist dictator, Hafez al-Assad, the leading-man of "secular" Arabism in those days, had to extort a *fatwa* edict from Lebanon's supreme Shi'a cleric, Musa al-Sadr, confirming the Alawites' Shi'ite Muslim pedigree. Alawites were incidentally members of an esoteric sect whose beliefs wedded Phoenician paganism, Eastern mysticism and metempsychosis, Christian Trinitarianism, and Greek and Gnostic conceptions of divinity, to what traditional Muslims considered nominal dubious Islamic practices.

A question worth asking then, would be why Assad was seeking a religious affidavit shoring up his Muslim credentials if his prerogatives as a ruler stemmed from "secular" sources in a "secular Arab nationalist" Syria? Why, because in multi-ethnic multi-religious polyglot Syria, the "secular" Baathist State Constitution still demanded that the President of the Republic be a Muslim—and Assad was evidently not considered a Muslim.

This is one example that confirms the rule across the board in the Middle East. A Coptic Christian would be hard pressed even imagining himself a President of Egypt. Egypt is incidentally a country-name derived from the Copts' own ethno-religious demonym, *Aigyptos.*

It may be true that the Arab nationalism trotted out by Syria's Assad, and his Baathist clones in Iraq and elsewhere *had* initially been a secular creed at its inception in the early twentieth century. But this early "secular" Arab nationalism was in the main the creed of Arabophone Christians, intelligible *only* to them and other non-Muslim minorities at the time. Indeed, secular nationalism was the doctrine of non-Muslims preoccupied with building a post-Ottoman polity for themselves where they would no longer be second-class *dhimmi* peoples living on sufferance in a Muslim state, often enduring persecution, discrimination, and the indignity of a devalued existence. And so, a "secular" Arabism denuded of Muslim content remained incomprehensible and therefore unattractive to the bulk of the Muslims of the late Ottoman period.

Even Michel Aflaq, the Damascene Greek Orthodox Christian founder of the Arab Baath Party—a committed secularist by all accounts, but nevertheless a Christian secularist—even *he* could not escape the centrality of Islam in his neighborhood and the centrality of Islam to the secular Arab nationalism that he promoted. He

conceded that being an "Arab" and being a "Muslim" were complementary if not synonymous.

From the time of the Prophet Muhammad during the seventh century, to the time of the Prophet of Arab nationalism in the early twentieth century, little has changed in the sense that identity and self-awareness under Islam had always been religious. So, in a sense, not only is there no opposition between Islam and the so-called "secular Arab nationalism" of the modern Middle Eastern state-system; indeed there may be a great deal of conflation and harmony and cooperation and synonymity.

Secular Baathist doctrine noted one observer, as articulated by Michel Aflaq, held that the Prophet Muhammad was also *ipso facto* the founder of the Arab nation, and was to be venerated as such by every Arab nationalist, whether Muslim or not. Indeed, Aflaq himself, the committed secular Christian, practiced what he preached and is believed to have converted to Islam so as to be better entitled to his Arabness.

There are many vignettes and adages in the literature of Arab nationalism that confirm the fact that "secularism" as a source of legitimacy in the post-Ottoman Arab-defined Middle East is at best a pipe-dream that defies the region's "laws of nature," which remain overwhelmingly religiously defined, not to say Islamically defined.

A leading Iraqi Arab nationalist writer for instance, Adurrahman al-Bazzaz, noted that Islam is the religion of the Arabs (and by the Arabs) *par excellence.* "There could in no way be a contradiction between Islam and Arabism," he claimed. Another writer chimed in asserting that "Islam is the other face of Arabism." Munah al-Solh, a prominent Lebanese Arab-nationalist theorist echoed his cohorts' attitudes, maintaining that "Islam is another name for Arab nationalism." Michel Aflaq himself is noted to have repeatedly made the claim that "Islam is to Arabism what bones are to the flesh." And perhaps most significantly, the logo of the Arab League is adorned with a fragment of a verse from the Koranic *Surat Al 'Umran: 110,* which reads "You are the finest nation (*Umma*) that was brought forth to Mankind." For the record, this is the Koranic banner of the "Arab League," *not* the "Muslim League."

So, in conclusion:

1- ISIS may indeed be dreaming of reviving a lost "Golden Age", but its nostalgia stands on solid historical ground; a nostalgic yearning that is to many *more* real than reality itself;
2- The brief "secular" interlude in the Middle East of the early twentieth century was exactly that; it was "brief," and it was an "interlude." It was also the

exception to the Middle Eastern rule, where "state" and "secularism" are outliers, and where "empire" and "religion" still carry the day;

3- "Secularism" remains an absurdity in the Middle East;

4- "Empire" (and indeed theocratic "empire") *can* be said to be a Middle Eastern invention; from the times of the Sumerians 5000 years ago, to our times' ISIS, the pattern has been one of discontinuity and change and imbrications of cultures and rulers; but "empire" in varied incarnations has remained unchanged, and Islam as a badge and rationale for empire has endured. ISIS is in line with that time-honored pattern. Islam after all, to the majority of Middle Easterners is the pinnacle of human existence; whatever came before Islam is not worth remembering let alone preserving (and ISIS is making good on that principle); and whatever may come after Islam can never measure up.

5- And lastly, whether ISIS lasts or not is *not* the question. What matters is that ISIS is here; perhaps not here for long, but it's been here long enough; it is demolishing cultures and peoples and monuments that withstood and stood the test of time. The work of ISIS is not that of delusional amateurs doomed to failure as some have suggested; rather, it is the expert performance of a sophisticated outfit with vision, conviction, and clarity.

This Spring, as the world commemorates Holocaust Day and the 100th anniversary of *Sayfo* and the Armenian Genocide, one may be rightfully concerned with the fate of millions of Middle Easterners under the gun, Muslims and non-Muslims alike; we may be concerned with the fate of thousands of Middle Eastern migrants escaping the violence of their homelands, strewn about in rickety vessels adrift around the Mediterranean. These are moving images; compelling causes for concern!

Yet another genocide seems to be in the forecast, and the collapse of the Middle East, with the ancillary destruction of Near Eastern Christianity and Christendom, continue unabated. Academics and pundits debate with zeal and clarity and alacrity about ISIS and the causes of ISIS and the life-expectancy of ISIS, while Christians in the Middle East—*others* as well, of course *others*, but *Christians* in the main—are stalked by a looming gruesome end, wondering for how much longer they will be able to hold out.

Conferences and academic papers and attempts at understanding, and all the attendant jeremiads and condemnations and righteous indignations and analyses that follow are all well and good! But little else is done! Little else perhaps *can* be done!! And the breviaries of the victims and the hunted grow longer! And all that is offered is a creepy form of *voyeurism*; looking at the atrocities, flinching with horror, getting offended, and then moving along social media sites, scrolling further down Twitter feeds!!!

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Crucifixions, beheadings, victims burned alive, others buried alive, and on and on and on…

This is *not* the eighth century! It is the twenty first! Most of us know that! But most of us live in a post-religious post-empire western bubble, and assume the rest of the world does *too*, or *ought* to.

At the behest of France, the United Nations Security Council recently debated the possibility of a UN "[Action Charter](#)" aiming at protecting Near Eastern Christians (and other endangered species) from the cruelty of ISIS.

Some think this is a fantastic initiative!! Better than nothing!!

In reality, this is an initiative sadder and more ominous than reality itself; it marks the last chapter in a long saga of destruction, signaling a sort of resignation in the looming extinction of one of the founding elements of human civilization—the "Native Americans" of the Near East.

ISIS may indeed be building a state based on delusions of grandeur and yearnings for a lost "Golden Age." But so are the yearned for "secular" alternatives to ISIS also a cross between *Candide* and *Pollyanna*; fancies bereft of historical basis. We may indeed be living in "the best of all world's possible" in the Middle East today; a world where bloodshed and brutality and *Candide*'s age of anarchy are cast out and wished away with the talismans and euphemisms of misplaced optimism. But the burden of decent observers, analysts, academics, and well-wishers ought to be more than just sighs and wishful-thinking.

A verbal amulet that many Lebanese carry with them from their civil war years and into their exile roughly translates as follows: "Thank God things are this god-awful and not one bit more!" But maybe stoic resignation is not always the sensible answer to calamity.

This present issue of *The Levantine Review*, although not treating directly the topic of ISIS, does touch upon various elements of Middle Eastern history, ideas, and cultural and intellectual traditions that ISIS, its progenitors, and its spawns may be seeking in turn to both erase and normalize. To wit, Amaya Martin's essay, which analyzes a popular Egyptian seasonal soap opera—aired during Ramadan—sheds light on jaded cultural clichés and anti-Semitic tropes that polite Western audiences may find disturbing, the product of an age long departed. Yet discarded anti-Semitic stereotypes seem to be getting a new lease on life in the Middle East. Montague Brown's paper treats the question of "natural law" and "reason," and their place in

Islamic culture from both a historical standpoint and in the present time. Joseph Spoerl's pithy study of Ibn Ishaq's biography of the Prophet Muhammad and the topical question of "tolerance" in Islam, is especially relevant for our times—redolent as these times may be with often depthless, naively optimistic treatments of touchy topics. Abjar Bahkou's essay offers a glimpse into the life and works of Jurji Zaydan—one of the leading figures of the Arabic *Nahda* literary renaissance movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—providing a brief analytical outline of the author's historical novels, and evaluating attitudes of both Islamists and Arabists towards his work's intentions. Ibrahim Bassal's paper examines the Hebrew and Aramaic residues in the spoken dialects of Israeli Christians and the written (Modern Standard) Arabic used in Syria, Lebanon, and Israel today. And finally, April Najjaj's essay delves into the place that "Muslim Spain" occupies in the collective memory of Arabs, Muslims, and Arab nationalists.

In sum, and in line with the aim of this publication since its inception, the present issue of *The Levantine Review* brings to the fore questions not ordinarily asked in the Middle East's prevalent paradigms, casting a prying gaze over stories and histories that do not necessarily "make it" into traditional history books.

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Boston College, May, 2015