

Beware the Lebanonisation of Egypt!

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By the time *Watani* reaches its readers on Sunday morning, the Egyptian people would have had their say on the draft constitution. If the draft is approved, Egypt would go on to elect a new People's Assembly; if it is not, we go back to Square One where a new Constituent Assembly is chosen and a new constitution should be drafted.

Whatever the result, we must own that the critical times Egypt is traversing deprive Egyptians of any joy at having a new constitution. A general sense of depression pervades, a natural outcome of the bitter conflicts and deep divisions that accompanied the birth of the draft constitution. The rift is so abysmal that it has led Egypt to the verge of civil war. No-one can predict how the losers in the referendum would take their loss: would they accept it and go ahead with the future, or will they reject the result and resume the street protest?

Recent indicators do not call for optimism. The violent confrontations that have taken place between the deeply divided Egyptians, in disastrous absence of the State of law and order, give rise to horror scenarios of the political standards that will govern the upcoming period, and that will determine what State Egypt will ultimately be.

I have lived my entire life defending the Egyptian State that gathers under its wings all Egyptians. I always insisted that this State was firmly rooted, so that no matter how divisive or oppressive one party of Egyptians may turn against another, the State remains above racism, division, or secession. This led me to affirm that Egypt's problems can never be resolved through a Lebanon perspective that preserves in form the State, the law, and the national army; even while it defends tribal and clan loyalties and the militias that serve their benefits and interests.

Today, I still retain my belief that Egyptians, despite their differences and disputes, remain under the shield of a sovereign, lawful State. A reading of the recent political scene, however, reveals the perils that await us.

First on the scene has been the first civil president since Egypt became a republic in 1953, elected upon his pledge to be a president for all Egyptians, even though he came from the Muslim Brotherhood's (MB) Freedom and Justice Party (FJP). Mursi promised that, once he was elected, he would give up his MB/FJP affiliation and work for the benefit of Egypt in its entirety. It did not take long for President Mursi, however, especially after a provocative confrontation with the judiciary, to pull off his national mask and reveal his absolute bias towards the MB. The plan of the MB was to pounce upon all the State institutions and leading posts in Egypt, in order to take over the country and convert it into a religious—I do not say Islamic—State. The methods to achieve that was to brag that they would bring about the *sharia* of Allah and virtues He commanded. Yet they resorted to lies, conspiracy, violence, and terrorism to the point of having no qualms about physically liquidating their opponents. Anyone who doubts this needs only recall the scene of the hordes the MB mobilised on the eve of the results of the presidential elections, who threatened they would burn Egypt if their candidate loses. Many Egyptians then gave in to the idea of a Mursi win if it was to save the country from civil war and bloodshed.

President Mursi continued to sponsor the Ikhwanisation (Ikhwan is Arabic for [Muslim] Brothers) of the Egyptian State until he—or his aides—imagined that he had it all. He then embarked on a venture unprecedented in Egypt's history: he issued his Constitutional Declaration last November by which he curtailed the independence of the judiciary and usurped the legislative authority, making his decisions untouchable and incontestable. When Egyptians, apart from the MB and their supporters, rose against the assault of the State and its establishments, President Mursi announced he enjoyed the support of 90 per cent of Egyptians, gave the green light to the Constituent Assembly that was drafting a constitution to rush it through, and put it to referendum. This, despite wide public division over the draft.

President Mursi appeared to mind neither the divisions he had promoted nor the wave of resignations by his aides in protest against his policies and decisions; he merely stayed on, in the safety of his palace, as Egyptians were viciously attacked by his clan and supporters. This was a black day for Egypt when the peaceful Mursi opponents were assaulted, beaten, dragged, tortured and killed, while the police looked on. The first indications of the breakup of the State were now obvious: no culprit was caught or brought to justice, which led to suspicions that they got away with their deed in return for their public support of the President and the presidential institution. It was also the first indication of the 'Lebanonisation of the Egyptian State'.

The other incident that took place some two weeks ago and does not even warrant the description 'Lebanonisation of the Egyptian State' since no 'State' was involved there in the first place, is the siege of the Egyptian Media Production City (EMPC) in the satellite town of 6 October, west of Cairo. The siege was conducted by the supporters of the Salafi leader Hazem Abu-Isma'il, under the demand of "purging the [independent] media". That media had come under fire from the Islamists, since it insisted on exposing the practices of the political Islamists and the scandalous "cooking" of the draft constitution. The Islamists thus besieged the EMPC, controlled and terrorised whoever went in or out, and drew a list of the media persons they threatened to assassinate. The State did not lift a finger to implement the rule of law. The mob built all the facilities that would afford it a long sit-in, including bedrooms and bathrooms; the State lifted not a finger. The hordes took the law into their own hands; the State lifted not a finger. The State absented itself entirely from the scene as chaos and violence reigned.

Did it come as any surprise that these hordes moved on the evening of Saturday 15 December towards Giza where they waged a vicious assault against the offices of the Wafd liberal party and its mouthpiece, the *al-Wafd* paper? They sent ultimatums and warnings to all independent papers that they were on their way to penalise them for criticising political Islam and the President and his policies. All this in absence of any security, State institution, or rule of law, and in total presidential silence. It was a fact then that there was no State and no president.

What now? This brings me to the "Lebanonisation of the Egyptian question"; I say "question" not "State" because, sadly, there is no more a State. So again, what now? I warn against Egypt drifting into the path of armed militias through which various factions fight for control...a path that leads to nothing but bloodshed.