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The State and the Arab State in Bishara's Democratic Project: Political-Philosophical Approaches**

الدولة والدولة العربية في مشروع بشارة الديمقراطي: مقاربات فلسفية سياسية

Abstract: This study examines the question of the state in Azmi Bishara's exploration of democracy through the lens of political-philosophical approaches to utopia, Rawlsian philosophy, citizenship, civil society, and justice, particularly in the Arab context. Where do Bishara's theses on the state sit within his broader intellectual project? What is the relationship between the citizenship-based state, civil society, and justice? How does his approach compare with John Rawls's political utopia? The study posits that Bishara focuses on developing a theory of the state and elaborating it conceptually, treating the state as a realistic political utopia. Bishara's chief goal is to ascertain the conditions necessary for the establishment of democratic systems in the Arab region. For him, the question begins logically with the state – its origin and evolution – and ends with democracy and issues pertaining to it.

Keywords: State; Azmi Bishara; Democracy; Citizenship; John Rawls; Civil Society; Justice.

ملخص: تتناول الدراسة موضوع الدولة في مشروع عزمي بشارة الفكري الديمقراطي، من خلال مقاربات فلسفية سياسية في اليوتوبيا والرولزية والمواطنة والمجتمع المدني والعدالة، ولا سيما ضمن السياق العربي، وتنطلق من الأسئلة التالية: ما موقع أطروحات الدولة عند بشارة في سياق مشروعه؟ وما علاقة الدولة، بما هي مواطنة في جزء مهم من تعريفها، بالمجتمع المدني والعدالة؟ وما وجه المقارنة بمقاربات جون رولز واليوتوبيا السياسية؟ وتحتاج الدراسة بأن بشارة يركّز على تطوير نظرية الدولة وبلورة مفهوما (أطروحاته في الدولة بوصفها يوتوبيا سياسية واقعية أيضًا). هدف بشارة الرئيس هو تأكيد شروط الوصول إلى نظم ديمقراطية في السياق العربي، والمسألة عنده تبدأ منطقيًا بالدولة، وما له صلة بنشوتها وتطورها، وتنتهي بالديمقراطية وما له صلة بها.

كلمات مفتاحية: الدولة؛ عزمي بشارة؛ ديمقراطية؛ مواطنة؛ جون رولز؛ مجتمع مدني؛ عدالة.

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Introduction

Azmi Bishara's works address issues of current theoretical and practical importance in the Arab world and may, taken as a whole, be best described as an Arab, democratic project of enlightenment. As part of this venture, his latest book, *al-Dawla al-'Arabiyya: Baḥṭh fī al-Mansha' wa-l-Masār* [*The Arab State: An Essay on its Origins and Trajectory*] (2024), serves as the promised follow-up to his seminal *Mas'alat al-Dawla: Uṭrūḥāt fī al-Falsafa wa-l-Nazariyya wa-l-Siyāqāt* [*The Question of the State: Philosophy, Theory, and Context*] (2023).¹ Bishara's project is, above all, an Arab one insofar as the "Arab question" lies at the core of his intellectual and political interest and constitutes the driving force behind his comparative research – both theoretical and empirical – on historical and contemporary models and experiences. He writes: "To derive theoretical models, we have no choice but to employ reason based on universal values coupled with an inductive theory of Arab reality".²

Bishara's project is also one of enlightenment, driven by a sustained effort to dispel misconceptions surrounding key concepts circulating across Arab and non-Arab intellectual, political, cultural, popular, populist, and elitist discourses. This edifying impulse has been evident since the publication of *Civil Society*, in which Bishara underscores the necessity of understanding civil society in relation to politics and the state, arguing that it constitutes a pathway to democracy that is contingent on the existence of the state. Subsequently, and particularly during the Arab Spring and its aftermath, Bishara engaged extensively with themes of populism, Salafism, sectarianism, freedom, justice, and revolution (particularly the Arab Spring revolutions), as well as the relationship between the army, politics, secularism, and the state, especially the Arab state.

In this body of work, Bishara draws an important distinction between nationalism and the nation, contrasting the concept of the "state-nation" – a nation of citizens within a state – with the traditional conception of the "nation-state", which in Arab discourse has become synonymous with the pan-Arab state. Underscoring the centrality of citizenship, he argues that it must be incorporated into the definition and theory of the contemporary modern state. A cursory reading makes clear that the overarching theme of Bishara's project is democracy, specifically in the Arab context, and the constellation of related questions it entails, such as the state, citizenship, civil society, and justice.

Bishara's work is interdisciplinary and cross-methodological. Although one of his earlier works, *Religion and Secularism in Historical Context*, is a treatise on religion and secularism, much of the discussion it has generated has unfolded in political and legal studies, specifically constitutional studies. Among Bishara's works, this is most apparent in his reflections on the state, which, in great part, tell "the story of secularization and the differentiation of politics from other realms such as religion and ethics".³ As Bishara notes, "Any beneficial theoretical approach to the state, even when arising from political philosophy derived from ethical philosophy, must strike a balance between employing the work of historians on the rise

¹ English translations of both these works are forthcoming. These two volumes represent the culmination of Bishara's intellectual project that began with the publication of *al-Mujtama' al-Madani: Dirāsa Naqdiyya* [*Civil Society: A Critical Study*] (1996), *Fī al-Mas'ala al-'Arabiyya: Muqaddima li-Bayān Dīmuqrāṭī 'Arabī* [*On The Arab Question: An Introduction to an Arab Democratic Manifesto*] (2007), the three volumes of *al-Dīn wa-l-'Almāniyya fī Siyāq Tārīkhī* [*Religion and Secularism in Historical Context*] (2013-2015), and *al-Intiqāl al-Dīmuqrāṭī wa-l-Ishkāliyyātuh: Dirāsāt Nazariyya wa-Taṭbiqīyya 'Arabiyya* [*Problems of Democratization: A Comparative Theoretical and Applied Study*] (2020). An English translation of the last title in this series has been published as: Azmi Bishara, *Arduous Paths: On the Theory and Practice of Democratic Transition* (London: Hurst, 2026). Bishara has also published seminal works on Israeli affairs and the Palestinian question, in both Arabic and English, as well as other works released by the ACRPS or in its conferences, seminars, and peer-reviewed journals. Bishara additionally founded several institutions in Palestine and spent years resisting Israeli policies before relocating to Doha, where he later retired from political activism and devoted himself to scholarly pursuits.

² Azmi Bishara, *Maqāla fī al-Ḥurriyya* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2016), p. 188.

³ Azmi Bishara, *Mas'alat al-Dawla: Uṭrūḥāt fī al-Falsafa wa-l-Nazariyya wa-l-Siyāqāt* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2023), p. 142. See also: Azmi Bishara, *al-'Almāniyya wa-l-'Almana: al-Sayrūra al-Fikriyya*, pt. 2, vol. 1, of *al-Dīn wa-l-'Almāniyya fī Siyāq Tārīkhī* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2015), pp. 303 - 304.

of states and the theories of sociology, political science, and law".⁴ *The Question of the State* constitutes a foundational work that logically ties together Bishara's other major writings. *Civil Society, Problems of Democratization*, and *The Arab State*, in particular, may be read as complementary volumes when situated within the overarching objective of Bishara's project: the theorization of democracy. *The Question of the State* can also be read as parallel or complementary to other works, especially *Religion and Secularism in Historical Context* and *Sectarianism Without Sects*.⁵

Religion and Secularism in Historical Context has been discussed by both Souhail Hbaieb⁶ and Mustapha Ait Kharouach.⁷ The former primarily addressed Bishara's conceptualization of secularism in that book⁸ and in two other works (*The Question of the State* and *Civil Society*). Hbaieb's analysis overlaps only tangentially with the focus of the present study, particularly in chapters 2 and 6, where he discusses the transition from "negative religion" to "affirmative state" – a point at which Bishara himself pauses – before turning to related themes in *The Question of the State* and *The Arab State*, which logically complement *Religion and Secularism in Historical Context*. The same is true of Kharouach, although, unlike Hbaieb, he does not address the question of the state and the notion of "statist consciousness". Instead, Kharouach is primarily concerned with delineating the contours of Bishara's theory of secularism and religion, as well as his engagement with the fallacies and grand narratives prevalent both globally and in the Arab world.

A broader body of scholarship has appeared that does not directly engage the core focus of the present study and instead advances distinct questions, aims, and analytical frameworks. Nevertheless, it intersects with this essay in its shared interest in Bishara's approaches to the state, democracy, justice, and civil society. The most significant contributions are by Hbaieb,⁹ Youssef Ben Adi,¹⁰ and Mohammed Hemchi.¹¹

A Theory of the State: Normative Political Ideal and Realistic Political Utopia

A summary of Bishara's conclusions in *The Question of the State*, restated in the introduction to *The Arab State*, is essential for understanding his theorization of the Arab context. In Bishara's account, the contemporary modern state – an iteration of a model that developed in Europe – emerged through the differentiation of the political sphere from other domains, including the religious, and through the subordination of these spheres to the political, with secularization understood as a process of separation and subjugation. The state monopolizes legitimate violence and lawmaking within its territorial borders¹² and is supported by non-coercive institutions, taxation, and bureaucracy. This is the established model, whose historical imposition has repeatedly generated conflict.

⁴ Bishara, *Mas'alat al-Dawla*, p. 87.

⁵ Azmi Bishara, *Sectarianism Without Sects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021 [2018]).

⁶ Souhail Hbaieb, *al-'Almāniyya min Sālib al-Dīn ilā Mūwjab al-Dawla: Rāhīniyyat Mashrū' Bishāra 'Arabiyyan* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2019).

⁷ Mustapha Ait Kharouach, *Naẓariyyat al-'Almāniyya 'ind 'Azmi Bishāra: Naqd al-Sardiyyat al-Kubrā li-l-'Almana wa-l-'Almāniyya* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2019).

⁸ Azmi Bishara, *al-Dīn wa-l-Tadayyun*, pt. 1 of *al-Dīn wa-l-'Almāniyya fī Siyāq Tārīkhī* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2013); Bishara, *al-'Almāniyya wa-l-'Almana*; Azmi Bishara, *al-'Almāniyya wa-Naẓariyyat al-'Almana*, pt. 2, vol. 2 of *al-Dīn wa-l-'Almāniyya fī Siyāq Tārīkhī* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2015).

⁹ Souhail Hbaieb, "Mashrū' 'Azmi Bishāra fī al-Taḥawwul al-Dīmuqrāṭī 'Arabiyyan: Dirāsa Muqārana fī Zaman al-Baḥth 'an Shurūt al-Qābiliyya li-Tatbīq al-Dīmuqrāṭiyya," *Tabayyun*, vol. 2, no. 3 (Winter 2013).

¹⁰ Youssef Ben Adi, "Naqd al-Mafāhīm fī al-Mashrū' al-Fikrī al-'Arabī: 'Azmi Bishāra Namūdhajan," Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 20 June 2019, accessed on 12/3/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zRgu>

¹¹ Mohammed Hemchi, "Global South Studies on Civil Society: An Arab Contribution," *Al-Muntaqa*, vol. 5, no. 1 (April/ May 2022), pp. 29-48.

¹² Bishara discusses the Ottoman Tanzimat and their role in the Arab-Islamic context in early secularization and the monopolization of lawmaking (and hence the transition to a state-nation and citizenship) in *al-Dawla al-'Arabiyya*, observing that the early leaders of Arab states, who were products of the Tanzimat, were more receptive to pluralism than subsequent leaders who came of age under colonialism. See: Azmi Bishara, *al-Dawla al-'Arabiyya: Baḥth fī al-Mansha' wa-l-Masār* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2024), p. 98.

The state, in Bishara's conceptualization, is distinct from regimes and individual rulers. It rests on what is shared between rulers and the ruled, namely citizenship, which is defined as membership in a state rather than in an ethnonational group or any sub- or supra-national affiliation, although the two may occasionally coincide. Sovereignty does not reside in the ruler but in this shared belonging and the rule of law it entails – that is, in citizenship itself, which signifies belonging to the state-nation or the nation of citizens, rather than to the nation-state, which emerged historically as an expression of belonging to an ethnonational group.

This understanding requires citizenship to be incorporated into the definition of the state, while recognizing the tension between citizenship and sovereignty, as well as the tension between the state in theory and in reality. Citizenship is a composite of rights and duties that regulate the relationship between the individual and the state. Ideology tends to reduce the concept of the state into a single organizing principle, an inclination that philosophy ought to resist. The state does not emerge in isolation, but as part of a system of states that mutually recognize one another's sovereignty and share an interest in preserving the framework within which they operate.¹³

It is important to recognize that the contemporary Arab state conforms to the existing state model.¹⁴ This applies both to the "old" Arab states (those with a precolonial territorial core such as Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco), and to the relatively newer Arab states whose sovereign borders were shaped by colonial division, partition, and annexation, including Syria, Algeria, Libya, Jordan, and Sudan. The difference between the two categories lies in the depth and durability of their historical legitimacy. Bishara argues, however, that legitimacy cannot be reduced to historical legitimacy alone, and that these states no longer qualitatively differ in the sources of legitimacy they draw on or in the form of consensus that sustains them.¹⁵

Bishara reaches these conclusions using multiple methodological tools that enable him to achieve the wide reflective equilibrium¹⁶ typical of normative political theory and political philosophy.¹⁷ He employs a "historical analysis of the origin and development of [the modern state] and extrapolating from existing states", thus developing a theory of the state "which differs, insofar as it is theoretical, from the reality of existing states".¹⁸

Evidently, once any theory gains currency, tensions arise between the theoretical model and empirical reality. The state can no longer be defined, theoretically or practically, solely by its monopoly on legitimate violence (in Max Weber's sense) or by sovereignty (as articulated by thinkers from Jean Bodin to Carl

¹³ Ibid., pp. 16-17.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 177.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 101 ff.

¹⁶ The method of wide reflective equilibrium, introduced by Rawls in his theory of justice, is most commonly used in contemporary normative prescriptive political theory. It creates balance and coherence between our principles, ideas, approaches, assumptions, and arguments by considering and reflecting on alternatives, thus ensuring these beliefs and ideas are carefully formulated and justifiable. See: John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 18-19, 42-44, 104, 379, 381, 507-508; John Mikhail, "Rawls' Concept of Reflective Equilibrium and Its Original Function in 'A Theory of Justice'," *Washington University Jurisprudence Review*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2010), pp. 23-28; Norman Daniels, "Wide Reflective Equilibrium and Theory Acceptance in Ethics," *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 76, no. 5 (1979); Carl Knight, "Reflective Equilibrium," *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, 27 November 2023, accessed on 10/4/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQrB>

¹⁷ Bishara's theories on the state align with the distinction drawn by philosophical and normative political theory between political reality and the politically desirable. The methodology in normative political theory (also known as analytical political theory) can be both descriptive and prescriptive: prescriptive in that it indicates "what ought to be" and descriptive in that it points to the practical constraints of specific situations. This allows for a wide range of approaches to norms and their application within these practical limitations. See: Chandran Kukathas & Philip Pettit, *Rawls: A Theory of Justice and Its Critics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), pp. 1-2; Christian List & Laura Valentini, "The Methodology of Political Theory," in: *Herman Cappelen, Tamar Szabó Gendler & John Hawthorne, The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Methodology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 1; Laura Valentini, "Ideal vs. Non-ideal Theory: A Conceptual Map," *Philosophy Compass*, vol. 7, no. 9 (2012), p. 654; Dorota Pietrzyk-Reeves, "Normative Political Theory," *Teoria Polityki*, no. 1 (2017), p. 179. See also Bishara's nuanced distinction between political theory and political philosophy in: Bishara, *Mas'alat al-Dawla*, p. 61 ff.

¹⁸ Bishara, *Mas'alat al-Dawla*, p. 426.

Schmitt).¹⁹ Other functions are now expected of it, most importantly those related to legitimacy and citizenship.²⁰ Bishara's theoretical propositions represent, as he says, what the state "ought to be", or the way it conceptualizes itself.²¹

Bishara here articulates the political ideal: the "political ought" or the "realistically utopian". This entails "probing the limits of practicable political possibility" and contemplating the possible, whose limits, according to John Rawls, are not static.²² As I have written elsewhere, "What appears in reality is, in many cases, impoverished compared to the latent possibilities within it".²³ This aligns with what Karl Mannheim referred to as "relative utopia": a vision that seeks to break the constraints of existing reality and transcend its limits. This type of utopia differs from ideologies that function as a false consciousness, obscuring and distorting reality,²⁴ and from ideal utopias, which posit fantastical and ultimately unattainable visions.

Bishara's propositions may indeed represent a relatively realistic utopia inherent in the conception of the state itself and, in principle, realizable in every individual state. For Rawls, such a vision corresponds to an existing condition within a society grounded in liberal democratic traditions and aspiring to achieve social justice across all institutional levels. This vision seems realistically utopian especially since reality itself seems to affirm the durability of the state and its legitimacy within the international system, even in cases of failed states that have lost their monopoly on legitimate violence. Bishara, however, does not seem optimistic about the possibility of establishing a realistic utopia between states or societies at the global level. This contrasts with Rawls, who argues that such a condition could exist among egalitarian, liberal democratic peoples and other societies possessing what he calls "a decent consultation hierarchy".

Contemporary international relations are not moving in this direction. On the contrary, severe and flagrant violations of ostensibly well-established international law, especially the violation of state sovereignty, human rights, and self-determination, are commonplace on the global stage.²⁵ Consider, for example, the occupation of Iraq and the extra-legal violation of its sovereignty, or the international community's indifference to Israel's ongoing crimes (displacement, ethnic cleansing, and apartheid) against the Palestinians,²⁶ not to mention Western complicity in and support for these violations.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 306. Weber defines the state from a functional, sociological perspective by its qualitatively distinct, though not its only instrument, which is its monopoly on legitimate or legal physical (or bodily) violence within territorial borders or a defined land (the sphere of sovereignty). See: Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in: *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, H. H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills (trans.) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 78.

²⁰ Bishara, *Mas'alat al-Dawla*, p. 427.

²¹ Ibid.

²² John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Cambridge, MA/London: Belknap Press, 2001), pp. 4-5, 13.

²³ Mohammed Othman Mahmoud, *al-'Adāla al-Ijtīmā'iyya al-Dustūriyya fī al-Fikr al-Librālī al-Siyāsī al-Mu'āsir* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2014), p. 154.

²⁴ Karl Mannheim, *al-Aydiyūlūjyā wa-l-Ūtūbyā: Muqaddima fī Susyūlūjyā al-Ma'rifa*, Mohammed Raja al-Dirini (trans.) (Kuwait: al-Maktabat al-Kuwaytiya, 1980), pp. 160-163, 257.

²⁵ For more on Bishara's discussion of Rawls' utopia in international relations, see: Bishara, *Mas'alat al-Dawla*, pp. 303-304; for a discussion of the violation of state sovereignty and international law, Western double standards, and international relations, particularly the tendency of states to rely on their own coercive power rather than legitimacy, laws, or international humanitarian principles – which Bishara describes as "a terrible tragedy" – see: *Mas'alat al-Dawla*, pp. 285 ff, 296; for more on utopian relations between societies and on societies with a "decent consultation hierarchy", see: John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 1999). In developing his "law of peoples", Rawls draws on Immanuel Kant's "Perpetual Peace", which discussed the notion of an alliance of peoples or nations. As a universal, contractualist utopia, the closest we have come is the United Nations, which has failed to secure world peace between and within nations. The world is thus moving away from the aspirations of Kant (and Rawls and others) for a utopian law of peoples. See: Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Essay*, M. Campbell Smith (trans.) (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1917), pp. 129-142. See also: Mahmoud, pp. 105-106.

²⁶ For more on Palestine, see two important works by Bishara: Azmi Bishara, *Palestine: Matters of Truth and Justice* (London: Hurst, 2022) and Azmi Bishara, *al-Ṭūfān: al-Ḥarb 'alā Filasṭīn fī Ghazza* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2024).

The State as a Realistic Political Utopia Unmasking Ideological Falsity: Bishara and Rawls

Rawlsianism, which envisions a political utopia centred on the value of justice, grew out of a relatively stable, well-established state and a society grounded in liberal, democratic cultural traditions (that is, a reasonable balance between freedom and equality). It sought to counter the ideological claims of neoliberalism associated with Friedrich August Hayek and Milton Friedman, and the libertarian philosophy that underpins and justifies it (notably Robert Nozick). The latter philosophy, calling for a return to radical liberalism, questions the legitimacy of the state, arguing that it entails a great measure of destruction, following Adam Smith. Accordingly, it advocates limiting the state's role, interventions, and functions to a minimum, reducing it to a "minimal state" in which everything except the army and law enforcement is left to transactions and agreements between citizens.²⁷ Rawlsianism similarly exposed the shortcomings and dysfunctions in illiberal, radical Marxist and socialist ideologies' conceptualization of the state and its functions.

Bishara's approach, by contrast, revolves around the state, specifically the citizenship-based state, conceived as a pathway to democracy mediated primarily by civil society. After all, there can be no strong, effective civil society without strong, effective citizenship, and no strong state without a strong society. His approach exposes the discursive shortcomings and dysfunctions of the same dominant ideologies. However, Bishara does not focus on the intimate relationship between freedom and equality, nor on the arguments that diminishing one inevitably undermines the other, thereby destabilizing both society and the state. Rather, his focus is on state legitimacy and the consolidation and ever-expanding functions and roles of the state.²⁸ These sovereign states are the entities the international system is keen to preserve, even when they become partially or wholly failed states.²⁹

Bishara also distinguishes between the new liberalism, that accommodates social justice, and neoliberalism, which operates according to the principle of "less state, more society". The latter, a radical ideology that entrenches social disparities and injustice, characterized by an overabundance of freedoms coupled with a paucity of equality, emerged in response to the crisis of the welfare state. I would argue that this welfare state does not fully merit its name, insofar as it has remained only minimally dedicated to social welfare and has functioned as a lifeline for capitalist liberalism in crisis.³⁰

In addition, Bishara's approach successfully dispels the confusion produced by the unproductive debate raised by communitarianism, buttressed, in part, by multiculturalist approaches associated with Will

²⁷ The same is true of the philosophy that underpins the ideology of the welfare state model, albeit to a lesser extent. Neoliberal ideology is a revival of radical capitalist liberal approaches in its utilitarianism and the limits it places on state intervention to achieve the common good. Liberal liberty is based on the principle of non-intervention by the state, or negative liberty in the sense argued by Isaiah Berlin, borrowing from Friedrich Hegel, particularly in economic activity and the market. It takes Adam Smith's invisible hand as an alternative to the state's hand (it has been mockingly called "the state of the night watchman and the traffic cop"). In this context, Nozick, in *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, distinguishes the state from utopia, which he sees Rawlsianism as representing, especially in its original form, as a hypothetical form in the first instance in social contract theories. The state, in this sense, is a middle ground between the realistic misery of anarchy and the contemplative bliss of utopia. See: Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 282-292; Robert Nozick, *Invariances: The Structure of the Objective World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. 77, 250, 289, 391, 399; Robert Nozick, *The Nature of Rationality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 68, 192, 194. See also: John Kenneth Galbraith, *Tārīkh al-Fīkr al-Iqtisādī: al-Māḍī Şūrat al-Ĥādir*, Ahmed Fouad Balbaa (trans.) (Kuwait: National Council for Culture, Arts, and Humanities, 2000), p. 76; Isaiah Berlin, *Arba' Maqālāt fī al-Ĥurriyya*, Abd al-Karim Mahfud (trans.) (Damascus: Ministry of Culture, 1980), pp. 60-61, 276-277, 285; Mahmoud, pp. 57-64; Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 2005), pp. 19, 364, 579-590.

²⁸ For more details, see Bishara, *Mas'alat al-Dawla*, pp. 33 ff.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9; Bishara, *al-Dawla al-'Arabiyya*, p. 18.

³⁰ Bishara, *Mas'alat al-Dawla*, pp. 83, 215. On the welfare state in this sense, see: Mahmoud, pp. 67 ff.

Kymlicka, Charles Taylor, and others,³¹ in response to claims of liberal neutrality in public affairs,³² that is, at the level of the state and its institutions. He also clarifies some prevailing misconceptions about the Treaty of Westphalia and its historical role in the emergence of the modern state,³³ as well as misconceptions surrounding social contract theory.

Presented as an exclusively liberal, democratic approach, Bishara argues that social contract theory has become an ideological, culturalist discourse that has gradually narrowed its conceptual horizon regarding the state and its assumed contractual legitimacy. The various contractarian approaches, as advanced by Hugo Grotius, Thomas Hobbes, Samuel von Pufendorf, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, and even Rawls, are subsequent to the rise of the modern state or immanent in it, and represent attempts to understand and explain the state in intellectual, reflective terms.³⁴ As Bishara observes, “The state itself does not arise out of a social contract”, which is “at best a theory for understanding the state [which justifies] a particular vision of it, its validity, and the conception of justice within it”.³⁵

Rawlsianism itself adopts a hypothetical contractualist approach intended to provide liberal justification in the public mind through the normative approach of overlapping consensus, in this instance, around principles of constitutional justice within a long-established democratic state. This bears little relevance to the Arab context, which is marked by crises of state legitimacy, challenges of state consolidation, and not least the unresolved question of democratic transition. Rawls also insists on the importance of liberal (democratic) political neutrality with respect to cultural and communitarian identities and affiliations, which he classifies as “reasonable” comprehensive doctrines compatible with political liberalism or democracy. Such neutrality aims to contain such identities within the framework of citizenship, construed as the identity of the state-nation; a position Bishara is actively advancing in the Arab context.

Bishara also refutes the fallacies embedded in the ideological discourse of Arab nationalists and radical Islamists, though such currents have much diminished in influence, and their conception of the state and citizenship carry far less weight among the Arab public. Historically, citizenship emerged as membership in an imagined ethno-cultural nation, which in turn became the pathway to membership in the modern state. Yet in the contemporary modern state, citizenship has transcended this framework to become a bond of rights and duties in its own right, giving rise to a state-nation made up of citizens irrespective of their ethno-cultural identity.

The fallacy lies in treating national bonds as inherently ethnonational, even where the two may at times overlap. Ideological nationalism holds that “the nation equals the ethno-nation, which transcends geopolitical boundaries”; conversely, other approaches insist on “ethnicizing the people of the state”. But a distinction between the nation and the ethno-nation, Bishara argues, “does not imply a contradiction

³¹ Sectarianism is one cultural, communal tendency seen in the context of the state, citizenship, and the public sphere – a topic that has been amply covered by Bishara in *Sectarianism Without Sects*. Multiculturalism refers to a state model that considers cultural, communal demands, and the challenges of communal disputes. Kymlicka argues that political justice should be based on cultural-communal membership and related rights “beyond the common rights of citizenship”. See: Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 206, n. 1.

³² This is what is known as difference-blind liberalism, particularly when it comes to cultural differences. In this context, Taylor argues, “Liberalism is not a possible meeting ground for all cultures, but is the political expression of one range of cultures, and quite incompatible with other ranges. ... All this is to say that liberalism can’t and shouldn’t claim complete cultural neutrality. Liberalism is also a fighting creed”. Looking at it from the opposite perspective, Taylor continues, “For mainstream Islam, there is no question of separating politics and religion the way we have come to expect in Western liberal society. ... Moreover, as many Muslims are well aware, Western liberalism is not so much an expression of the secular, postreligious outlook that happens to be popular among liberal intellectuals as a more organic outgrowth of Christianity – at least as seen from the alternative vantage point of Islam”. See: Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” in: Charles Taylor et al., *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 62.

³³ Bishara, *Mas’alat al-Dawla*, pp. 52, 54, 99, 244, 271-272, 298.

³⁴ For more detail, see: *Ibid.*, pp. 163 - 181.

³⁵ Bishara, *Maqāla ft al-Hurriyya*, p. 186.

between the majority's ethno-cultural identity as a cohesive force and the citizenship-based nation that encompasses all citizens".³⁶ This applies equally to the "pan-Arab nationalist current [which] presumes the existence of an Arab nation that has yet to attain independence in a unified state" and to the radical Islamist discourse³⁷ that prioritizes political affiliation with the Islamic community and aspires to the restoration of a utopian caliphate that unites this *umma*.³⁸

At its core, what distinguishes Bishara's relatively realistic political utopia from both the utopia of an Islamic nation united under a caliphate and the utopia of an entire Arab nation unified within one state³⁹ is that the utopian caliphate is not grounded in an inductive reading of the reality of the contemporary modern state – with its origin and evolution in Arab, Islamic, and international contexts. Rather, it draws on prophetic religious texts, which may be valid according to the standards of hadith sciences,⁴⁰ yet are not anchored in a specific historical time, spatial context, or set of concrete circumstances. The caliphate ideal thus expresses a nostalgic longing for a perceived glorious past that ended with the collapse of the last state to politically unite a substantial segment of the Muslim world, namely the Ottoman Empire, which some do regard as a caliphate.

This utopia clings to a historical legitimacy that the contemporary modern state has transcended and abandoned for other forms of legitimacy and resilience of the kind Bishara discusses in *The Question of the State* and *The Arab State*. The utopias of both the Islamic caliphate and the pan-Arab state (stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Arabian Gulf) are unrealistic, speculative solutions to profound crises that lack practical solutions, even if such aspirations may persist in the collective consciousness for historical, cultural, linguistic, and ideological reasons.

More troubling than utopian consciousness itself is its evolution into a radical ideological consciousness that constricts the moral, humanistic, and civilizational dimensions inherent in Islam and Arabism. Ideology often narrows the possibilities of cultures, philosophies, and religions, confining them within closed, exclusionary intellectual systems, in contrast to the relatively realistic utopia which seeks attainable improvements in socio-political reality.

Moreover, even Islamists who have abandoned the hope of a utopian caliphate and instead seek to govern existing nation-states in the name of religion and the Sharia deny the state, in whole or in part,⁴¹ particularly its monopoly on lawmaking, a defining element of the modern state. In doing so, they bypass the historical evolution of the state, a revolution that is inseparable from the process of secularization. This position entails regressing to a time in which no clear distinction existed between public and private realms, thereby misapprehending "the strength of the Arab state and the breadth of its social base".⁴² What distinguishes the relatively realistic utopia is its grounding in social and political reality and its capacity for concrete realization. It offers a structured model that renders it intelligible – a requirement of human

³⁶ Bishara, *al-Dawla al-'Arabiyya*, p. 19. For more details, see: Azmi Bishara, *al-Intiqāl al-Dīmuqrāṭī wa-Ishkālīyyātuh: Dirāsa Nazariyya wa-Taṭbīqīyya 'Arabiyya* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2020), pp. 325 ff.

³⁷ Islamist discourse remains more prevalent and influential than Arab nationalist discourse among non-elites in Arab states.

³⁸ Bishara, *al-Dawla al-'Arabiyya*, p. 22.

³⁹ We should not overlook the difference between the Islamist and Arab nationalist utopias. Ethnocultural identity has been an entry point for the evolution of the state-nation in numerous modern cases and can represent a deep-seated cultural identity within the framework of the state and its nation.

⁴⁰ Particularly prophetic hadith. One well-known hadith details the progression of the Muslim *umma* as ruled first by the Prophet, then the caliphate following the path of the Prophet, then a stinging dominion, then a tyrannical dominion, then, again, a caliphate following the path of the Prophet. See: Ahmed Ibn Hanbal, *al-Musnad*, vol. 30 (Beirut: al-Risala Foundation, 1999), p. 355.

⁴¹ A formula consistent with the logic of the modern democratic state would be the acceptance of Islamic jurisprudence (and Islamic law more generally) as a source (perhaps even a primary source) of legislation, which is the exclusive domain of the state, represented by elected and appointed legislators. At a minimum, Islamic law would govern personal status matters, and the same applies to the religious laws of other faith communities. In most cases in the developed world, the lawmaking monopolized by modern states is not divorced from the culture of their societies, including their religions, customs, and heritage.

⁴² Bishara, *al-Dawla al-'Arabiyya*, p. 181.

societies – and stands in sharp contrast to the value-diminishing realm of the fantastical. This is what dominant ideologies attempt to convey, not because the counter-utopia is unrealistic, but because it exposes ideological falsehood and the dearth of political legitimacy they seek to obscure.⁴³

In this context, Bishara asserts, “An understanding of highly complex social phenomena like the state based on a single principle, no matter how rational or moral, can evolve into an ideology”.⁴⁴ This view aligns closely with Rawls’s conclusions in political liberalism, centred on the principle of constitutional justice. In short, the state should not become an ideological instrument that imposes its vision and doctrine – including liberalism itself or any other secular doctrine – should these be advanced as ideologies.⁴⁵

One of Bishara’s chief objectives in *The Question of the State* is to make “a broad theoretical contribution” of particular relevance to the question of the Arab state by “developing a definition of the state and the significance of that definition encompassing citizenship; the relationship between sovereignty, legitimacy, and citizenship, and between the nation and nationalism; and the distinction between the state and the system of government”.⁴⁶ Indeed, the Arab region is grappling with profound challenges directly related to the state, citizenship, sovereignty, legitimacy, nationhood, nationalism, and systems of government, compounded by the prevalence of distorted consciousness, which is largely ideological in nature. These problems hobble the progress of Arab states toward democratic transition and the consolidation of durable democratic regimes, which represent a principal goal of Bishara’s project.

A state that recognizably conforms to Bishara’s theoretical propositions is one that strives for the relative perfection of the political ideal, and such a state is necessarily governed by democratic regimes. In contrast, the Arab state in its current form satisfies only the bare minimum required to persist as a state: “a central bureaucracy, a regular army, fixed territorial borders, and finally, nationality/citizenship”.⁴⁷ In other words, it still falls short of the ideal state in its most complete, relatively realistic form. Accordingly, it has yet to realize citizenship as the flipside of sovereignty, anchored in rights, duties, and the rule of law, and instead treats citizenship as mere nationality or a marker of subordination to a particular state.⁴⁸ Moreover, it still lacks a politically influential civil society.

The state, when conceived as a political ideal in which citizenship, in Bishara’s sense, is integral, is likely either to be democratic or to evolve, over time, into a fully constituted and integrated state governed by a democratic regime. In the modern era, the European state had already evolved in ways that aligned with a substantial portion of Bishara’s propositions before the advent of contemporary democratic regimes, which later adopted liberal democratic models to varying degrees. Europe reached this point through multiple historical trajectories, all of which involved the dismantling of undemocratic regimes but not of the state itself, which by then had become a concrete and conceptual reality. This raises key questions about Bishara’s project: Why begin with the state? Why insist on citizenship as an integral part of its definition? And what is the relationship between the citizenship-based state, on the one hand, and civil society and justice on the other, especially in the Arab context?

⁴³ Mannheim, pp. 248, 257. On the question of legitimacy, utopia, and ideology, see: Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, George H. Taylor (ed.) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 258.

⁴⁴ Bishara, *Mas’alat al-Dawla*, p. 426.

⁴⁵ Mahmoud, p. 156.

⁴⁶ Bishara, *Mas’alat al-Dawla*, p. 11.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 386.

⁴⁸ Bishara, *al-Dawla al-‘Arabiyya*, p. 178.

Citizenship as Integral to the State and a Condition for Democracy

For Bishara, citizenship constitutes the most fundamental element of and the primary prerequisite for democracy. Indeed, he argues that the development of democracy is nothing more than the evolution and universalization of citizenship: “The idea and practice of citizenship, even before it is democratic, is a prerequisite for a democratic regime”.⁴⁹ Citizenship here refers to the relationship between the individual and the state, not the group, whether national, ethnic, religious, or sectarian. It is the socio-political identity of the state-nation.

The “state-nation” implies a state-society (for instance, Egyptian society) composed of its citizens (Egyptian citizens), in which there is no contradiction between being, for example, an Egyptian citizen and a Coptic citizen. The fundamental unifying socio-political identity here is “Egyptian”, while “Coptic” denotes a cultural and communal identity to which the individual belongs. Neither the individual rights and choices upheld by citizenship in the Egyptian state, nor one’s cultural, communal affiliations, are compromised within this framework.

Communitarian and multicultural approaches essentially remove citizenship from the public sphere. In so doing, they confuse multicultural pluralism – a reality that must be addressed within the framework of citizenship, with rights and duties, and with group affiliation treated as an individual choice (or what ought to be an individual choice, though it often is not) – with partisan political pluralism. When partisan political pluralism aligns with multicultural pluralism, the state does not move toward a democratic regime but rather toward a consociational, quota-based model.⁵⁰ Existing regimes in Lebanon (sectarian), Iraq (sectarian and ethnic, cultural, and linguistic nationalism),⁵¹ and Somalia (tribal) are all examples of quota-based models ostensibly grounded in consensus.

As the shared culture of citizens in a state-nation, democratic culture – that is, respect for the rules of the democratic process and a culture of rights governing the relationship between the individual, the state, and fellow citizens – cannot develop in the absence of democratic practice. Yet the conditions that allow for democratic practice cannot be met before a democratic system of government comes into existence, which is impossible without an entrenched state in which citizenship represents another facet of sovereignty. Citizenship, even before the regular rotation of power via elections, is the sole vehicle through which the rule of law and equality before the law can be realized. It provides the minimum threshold of rights exercised in the face of arbitrary powers and regimes, and it is the basis upon which demands for political rights are articulated. Citizens expect political rights by virtue of their primary identity as citizens, which, in the contemporary modern state, wholly transcends the status of subjects, who do not expect political and human rights and freedoms but merely hope for good treatment and tolerance.

Under democracy, both the state and citizenship are fully realized, and the demand for democracy is not limited to securing the peaceful rotation of power. Democratic practice also leads to the expansion and deepening of citizenship itself, affirming that majority rule, when detached from the premise of citizenship and maintained for purposes other than advancing and regulating citizen rights, becomes a dictatorship

⁴⁹ Azmi Bishara, “Naw’ān min al-Muwāṭana: Kalimat al-Duktūr ‘Azmi Bishāra bi-Munāsabat Manḥihi Jā’izat Ibn Rushd li-l-Fikr al-Ḥurr,” Ibn Rushd Fund, 14 December 2002, accessed on 12/3/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQHc>

⁵⁰ Azmi Bishara, *Fī al-Mas’ala al-‘Arabiyya: Muqaddima li-Bayān Dīmuqrāfi ‘Arabī* (Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 2007), pp. 190-191.

⁵¹ Bishara discusses the case of Iraq in depth, particularly in connection with sectarianism, in *Sectarianism Without Sects*, pp. 575-789.

of the majority. Procedural democracy is therefore not synonymous with majority rule; it is rather rule by representatives of the majority in accordance with values and principles, foremost among them citizenship.⁵²

Bishara asserts that a polity composed of a state and subjects, rather than citizens, cannot generate the dialectic necessary for the development of democracy, because it lacks the interactive dynamic between the individual, society, and the state – the dynamic that produces the dialectic of citizens, civil society, and democratic state. A state without citizenship does not embody popular sovereignty, since the people, understood as citizens of the state, are the bearers of that sovereignty. Nor does it constitute a source of political legitimacy, including the legitimacy of the state itself, which entails the right of a people to determine its political destiny, whether by remaining within an existing state or opting for independence, for example through a direct referendum.

Such a state does not bolster rights and their development. In a democratic state, rights are derived from citizenship; even collective identity and rights have evolved as derivatives of the rights held by individuals as citizens. Citizenship, as an identity shared equally by all members of a state, is thus the exclusive regulator of the relationship between the individual and the state. This neutralizes religious, national, and other identities in the individual's relationship with the state, without denying individuals the right to claim these identities so long as this does not conflict with citizenship rights as they have evolved within a liberal democratic framework.⁵³

With the development of citizenship, a distinction emerged between the identity of state-nation – the nation of citizens and the flipside of sovereignty – and ethnonational or religious identity. While the latter may preserve national cohesion, it plays no political role in the democratic state, which cannot be a religious, ethnonational, or sectarian entity that politicizes communal ties or any group's claims and demands. In a liberal democratic state, belonging to communal groups must be theorized as a matter of individual choice, so that such an affiliation remains grounded in the idea of citizenship rather than undermining it. Any theory of the state that fails to centre citizenship leads to state models organized around pre-, sub-, and supra-national affiliations (communitarianism and its political variants, internal and external). These models do not move toward a liberal, egalitarian, civic democracy. Among them is what is known as consociational democracy, which Bishara believes cannot be described as democracy.⁵⁴

The Citizenship-Based State as a Condition for Civil Society and Democracy

Although civil society can be distinguished from other public spheres, it cannot be understood, interpreted, and theorized, or its critical democratic role appreciated in isolation from the political sphere and the citizenship-based state. Bishara asserts that civil society “leads to democracy because it is the process of the

⁵² See: Bishara, “Naw’ān min al-Muwāṭana.” Bishara exposes the realities of the state, citizenship, and democracy in the Israeli context, saying: “The fundamental challenge facing democratic forces in a non-democratic state is the practice of citizenship, habituating individuals to act like citizens, and habituating various political forces to the concept of equal citizenship and equality before the law. You know that I belong to a people deprived of citizenship because they live under occupation and are denied the right to self-determination and sovereignty. We cannot speak of citizenship under occupation and absent full sovereignty. As I have already said, citizenship is the flipside of sovereignty. I am also a citizen of a state in which religious or national affiliation constitutes the basis of the individual's relationship with the state. I am a citizen of a state that does not belong to its citizens.” For further discussion, see: Azmi Bishara, *Min Yahūdiyyat al-Dawla ḥattā Shārūn: Dirāsa fī Tanāquḍāt al-Dīmuqrāṭiyya al-Isrā’īliyya*, 2nd ed. (Cairo: Dar al-Shorouk, 2004). In *Mas’ala al-Dawla*, p. 413, n. 41, Bishara describes Israel as an apartheid, settler colonial state. On democratic culture, see: Azmi Bishara, “al-Thaqāfa al-Siyāsiyya: Mulāḥazāt ‘Āmma,” *Tabayyun*, vol. 12, no. 45 (Summer 2023), pp. 23-29. See also: Bishara, *al-Intiqāl al-Dīmuqrāṭī*, pp. 407 ff.

⁵³ Bishara, “Naw’ān min al-Muwāṭana.”

⁵⁴ Bishara, *Fī al-Mas’ala al-‘Arabiyya*, pp. 149-150. The most prominent theorist of consociational democracy is Arend Lijphart, who elaborated on the concept in multiple works. See: Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977). The consociational model as promoted and applied in Iraq and Lebanon has come in for severe criticism by Bishara, who has detailed both its theoretical and practical problems. See: Bishara, *Sectarianism Without Sects*, pp. 221-247.

development of democracy itself"; accordingly, the battle for civil society in countries lacking democratic systems of government is "the battle for democracy [within] the realm of the state".⁵⁵

Bishara characterizes the citizenship-based state-nation as "a nation on the outside and a civil society on the inside",⁵⁶ arguing that "civil society is an intellectual and historical process oriented toward citizenship and democracy, unfolding through a set of articulations and differentiations in the relationship between ... society and the state".⁵⁷ In other words, the relationship between the contemporary modern state, citizenship, civil society, and democracy is complex and dialectical: each element leads necessarily to the others, whether temporally and/or logically. Crucially, however, the sequence must begin with the state and the legitimacy of its existence.

Bishara clarifies the conceptual confusion surrounding civil society that results from the uncritical adoption of ready-made categories ill-suited to states governed by undemocratic or transitional regimes, such as those found in the Arab region. An example is the assumption that civil society is synonymous with non-governmental organizations, or that it is apolitical. Such misapprehensions stem from a failure to appreciate the historical political role civil society played in the development of democracy and the delimitation of the state's powers in the West.

Civil society does not develop under a weak state, Bishara argues. Rather, it is "born out of the power of the state, to act as a counterweight to it". It is "the product of the delimitation of state prerogatives ... because it is feared that the state will subordinate society entirely", potentially transforming into a totalitarian, ideological force. Civil society is therefore not the result of "state collapse, retreat, or destabilization", but of a clearly articulated relationship between the state (the sphere of authority and the monopoly of force) and society, which is ostensibly the source of the state's legitimacy.⁵⁸

Bishara concludes that the knot binding civil society, citizenship, and the state-nation cannot be severed. The state-nation, in his conception, transcends both the nation-state and cultural, identitarian, and linguistic nationalism. He distinguishes the latter type of national bond from ethnonationalism and other sub- and supra-national affiliations, delineating its limits and role while discussing its importance as an entry point for the development of the state-nation within the broader evolution of the contemporary modern state.⁵⁹ If a polity fails to evolve to the stage of the citizenship-based state-nation, these sub- and supra-national affiliations will continue to dominate political life, a condition that opportunistic regimes can exploit to remain in power. Such regimes do not work toward – or have, at best, failed to achieve – social integration based on citizenship, which Bishara insists is indispensable to the realization of the state-nation. Otherwise, he writes, "There develops no consciousness of a civil society grounded in the relationship between the citizen, with his various affiliations in his own private sphere; the nation, which is broad enough to accommodate multiple affiliations; and the state, which is the polity of that nation".⁶⁰

Bishara restores the political dimension to civil society, fleshing out its relationship with the state, citizenship, and democracy, especially in the Arab context. Civil society, he writes, is bound up with "the [state-]nation, and both stand before the state as a source of its legitimacy in a democracy ... If the nation, however, does not find political expression in the state [or at least in the longing for it], then there is no place for the modern nation, the nation of citizens, the political nation, or civil society".⁶¹

⁵⁵ Azmi Bishara, *al-Mujtama' al-Madani: Dirāsa Naqdiyya*, 6th ed. (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2012), p. 49.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 243-295.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

Addressing the Arab context directly, Bishara connects civil society and the nation with ruling regimes' loss of legitimacy, asserting that the search for Arab civil society is "intimately linked to the process by which the polity of the (Arab) nation takes shape, at least in consciousness".⁶² While Bishara observes that this does not require the formation of a single Arab state, he stresses that if an Arab nation cannot be conceptualized, it will not be supplanted by, for example, a Syrian or Yemeni nation, but rather by communal and organic sub- or supra-national affiliations (for instance, Sunni, Alawite, Shi'i, southern and northern, Kurdish and Arab).

Thus, in the Arab context, it is necessary not to "make of civil society a false witness". It cannot be absent or excluded from the concerns of politics and the state, for three reasons: "Civil society takes root only in the space of the reciprocal relationship with the state ... There is an inextricable link between the formation of the nation and the formation of civil society, which signifies a belonging based on citizenship ... The battle for democracy is a political battle".⁶³

Citizenship as Justice and Social Democracy

Bishara's understanding of citizenship as "a system of rights and duties"⁶⁴ inevitably leads to a consideration of justice. In a liberal democracy, justice begins with the constitution and extends through all laws, statutes, and even the smallest issues concerning citizens. It is a reasonable, balanced formula for reconciling freedoms with forms of equality. This suggests that, among the many models of democracy, Bishara's thought leans to a form of social democracy.

Ultimately, this does not set him apart from Rawls, though for him, the citizenship-based state must first be consolidated. Only then can it be governed by a democratic system, which, for Bishara, seems to be a form of social democracy. Indeed, Rawlsian justice constitutes a model of social constitutionalism designed for a stable society governed by a liberal democratic regime – something that remains beyond the current reach of Arab societies.⁶⁵

The connection between rights and justice implies that justice is inseparable from citizenship⁶⁶ in the contemporary modern state. Insofar as citizenship is linked to a democratic outcome (namely to democracy), this implies that democracy is bound to justice. This suggests that if a state is to enjoy durable cohesion and stability, it must be governed by social democratic regimes⁶⁷ that balance the values of freedom and equality in their constitutions, laws, and policies. Freedom without a corresponding measure of equality – in the sense of empowerment or capability, as theorized by Amartya Sen,⁶⁸ whose approach is fundamentally compatible with the essential theses of Rawls and Bishara – degenerates into a false ideological slogan, liberal in appearance (neoliberalism and the welfare state). In this context, Bishara asserts, "It is no longer possible to imagine a justice that does not regulate the relationship between equality and freedom".⁶⁹

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 32.

⁶⁴ Bishara, *Fi al-Mas'ala al-'Arabiyya*, p. 150.

⁶⁵ See: Azmi Bishara, "Mudākhala bi-Sha'n al-'Adāla: Su'āl fī al-Siyāq al-'Arabī," *Tabayyun*, vol. 1, nos. 1-2 (Summer 2013).

⁶⁶ Bishara, *Maqāla fī al-Hurriyya*, p. 150.

⁶⁷ So-called property-based democracy, or what I have taken to calling, though without enthusiasm, "a legally limited democracy of property", is an important theoretical model recently developed in the context of Rawlsianism and liberal social democracy in general; it may also have something of a socialist bent. For more details, see: Mahmoud, pp. 259-278; Murad Diyani, *Hurriyya, Musāwā, Karāma Insāniyya: Tūbāwiyyāt al-'Adāla min Manzūr al-Namūdhaj al-Librālī al-Iskandanāwī* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2016), pp. 257-315.

⁶⁸ Amartya Sen's approaches can best be grasped in: Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (New York: Belknap Press, 2009) and Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1999).

⁶⁹ Bishara, *Maqāla fī al-Hurriyya*, p. 187.

Accordingly, equality must be conceptualized in such a way that “encompasses affinity or identity groups without it coming at the expense of freedom and equality, but rather resting on their foundation”.⁷⁰ Justice, for Bishara, is linked to the citizenship-based state and the mechanisms of social integration, which constitute a solid foundation for the construction of the contemporary modern state-nation.⁷¹ When theorizing justice, distinctions between what is intrinsic and extrinsic to the state can only be made in the abstract, Bishara writes. A form of consociationalism without equal citizenship, he argues, is a recipe for low-grade civil war, liable to ignite at any time: “The relationship between social integration and justice is thus not a superfluous question, but rather a fundamental issue that the modern state, especially a democratic one, cannot ignore”.⁷²

Justice, then, is political and bound up with the state, insofar as the state provides its main framework and constitutes the most important realm of its sovereignty.⁷³ On this, Bishara and Rawls agree. Rawls starts from a general moral sense of justice and a Kantian ethics of duty to elaborate his theory of political justice – justice as fairness. This refers to the supra-constitutional, foundational principles necessary in a functioning liberal democratic state to ensure socio-political stability and to uphold liberal values themselves, especially freedom, which becomes hollow in the absence of a reasonable degree of equality and empowerment.

Bishara, by contrast, starts from a theory of the state in its ideal yet attainable form – a realistic political utopia – derived inductively from historical and contemporary realities, with citizenship at its core. Building on this foundation, he brings together his theses on civil society and justice to examine the possibility of a realistic democracy in an Arab region still plagued by profound problems and facing multiple obstacles on the path to democratic transition.

If Bishara's immediate concern is not to establish a purely philosophical-moral foundation for his theory in the manner of Rawls and Kant – though he does discuss moral philosophies when germane – an altruistic social ethics nonetheless lies at the heart of his propositions. If realized, especially in the Arab context, this ethics would uphold human dignity, freedom, rights, and equality – both among citizens, and, more broadly, in relation to humanity and societies that have made greater strides toward political justice in the form of civic freedoms, human rights, and social welfare systems, as seen in many Western societies.⁷⁴

The liberal democracy that Bishara affirms is moreover influenced by its philosophical-moral roots, especially deontological liberalism, with its belief that human autonomy, freedom, and equality are ends in themselves, not mere means. Politically, this translates into a belief that a legitimate state must rest on *a priori* principles: the freedom of all members of society as human beings, their equality with all others as subjects, and their independence in the public sphere as citizens.⁷⁵

The primacy of rights and duties over conceptions of the good or the beneficial is foundational to deontological liberalism.⁷⁶ Personal liberal autonomy refers to each person's ability to decide for themselves what is good or beneficial and to their freedom to pursue it.⁷⁷ Accordingly, the state must be politically neutral on what citizens, both individuals and groups, deem good or beneficial within the private sphere,

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 189.

⁷² Ibid., p. 190.

⁷³ Bishara, “Mudākhala bi-Sha'n al-'Adāla,” p. 11.

⁷⁴ The majority of Western states can be most aptly described as exhibiting “Kantian behavior internally and Machiavellian behavior externally”. See: Tarek Mitri et al., “Munāqashat Kitāb 'Azmī Bishāra *Mas'alat al-Dawla*,” Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Discussion series, January 2024, p. 8. I would say “internally Kantian in form” since they have failed to achieve a reasonable degree of equality, and particularly of empowerment. This description can be broadly generalized to their dealings with other states, societies, and individuals, as manifested blatantly and shamelessly in Gaza since the al-Aqsa Deluge, and for decades before that in Palestine and elsewhere.

⁷⁵ Bishara, *Mas'alat al-Dawla*, p. 164.

⁷⁶ For more detail, see: Mahmoud, pp. 182 ff.

⁷⁷ Taylor, p. 57.

which encompasses religious, sectarian, or ethnic cultural and communal norms, including those reflected in personal status laws in the Arab context.

In the public sphere, however, individuals must be treated equally, both as citizens protected by constitutional citizenship and by the legal system more broadly. This coincides with social integration programmes, which Bishara consistently emphasizes as the foundations of citizenship – an objective that Arab regimes in multicultural, pluralistic societies have failed to pursue, often with catastrophic results.

In understanding Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's philosophy of the state and the triad of state, individual, and society, Bishara highlights the importance of public morals and the standards of conduct in the public sphere beyond the group or organic community. The components of this tacitly agreed-upon morality include duty, responsibility toward others, and trust in society, the state, and their institutions. If this ethical code is distorted or perverted on a broad scale, it impedes the democratic transition and the building of democratic systems.⁷⁸ In this context, it is noteworthy that Bishara's philosophical approaches to the state show clear Hegelian influences, particularly his response to social contract theory and his assertion that the state is a "moral/rational" entity.⁷⁹ Its moral dimension is public and social rather than transcendental and reflective, the latter being grounded in the abstract, autonomous subject, as with Kant and Rawls.

The Arab State in Bishara's Project

Bishara addresses the critical problems facing the Arab state, among them the distinction between the legitimacy of the state and the legitimacy of the regime that governs it. The Arab Spring and its revolutions, and the subsequent attempts at democratic transition, have only heightened the urgency of this issue. In Egypt, the transition was thwarted; in Tunisia, its derailment is nearly complete. The consequences have been disastrous.

States such as Syria, Yemen, Libya, and post-occupation Iraq have lost a degree of their sovereignty and their monopoly over legitimate violence and lawmaking within their borders. At the same time, the regimes that govern them face crises of legitimacy that manifest as crises of state legitimacy. The relationship between group dynamics – clan, sectarian, religious, ethnic, and sub- and supra-national chauvinisms and belongings – and the state and its legitimacy has become deeply entangled, as opportunistic regimes have invested in and exploited these dynamics to remain in power. What appears to be an erosion of state legitimacy is, in fact, a crisis of the regime and its own legitimacy. The problem lies in regimes' failure to integrate citizens, which has triggered conflict and engendered social cleavages.

The development of citizenship has been hindered by regime policies that deal with groups based on loyalty to the regime, as well as by the tattered state of public services and other non-coercive social integration institutions. Most importantly, it has been undermined by the erosion of citizenship rights and duties, without which "citizenship is but a mere formality, i.e., an ID document".⁸⁰ This condition stands in stark contrast to Bishara's utopian yet realistic conceptualization of the contemporary modern state, which means democracy is similarly out of reach at present. Bishara argues that there can be no modern state without citizenship as an integral component; likewise, there can be no civil society and democracy without citizenship, nor can citizenship, democracy, and civil society exist outside the framework of the state or beyond its umbrella.

⁷⁸ Bishara, "al-Thaqāfa al-Siyāsiyya," pp. 16-17. For Hegel, the state "instantiates public ethics in an institution capable of representing and applying them". See: Bishara, *Mas'alat al-Dawla*, pp. 186-187, 195.

⁷⁹ Bishara, *al-Mujtama' al-Madani*, p. 173.

⁸⁰ Bishara, *al-Dawla al-'Arabiyya*, pp. 17-18.

Bishara concludes that the Arab state was consolidated through its own momentum, its struggle for survival, the expansion of its social base, and the interest of the international order in preserving existing states. He continues:

In this respect, there is no difference between “old” states [i.e., those with a precolonial territorial core] and those that are a product of colonial partition. There is no longer a conflict over the existence of the Arab state, but rather over systems of government. Even so, the conflict over the regime in some countries can destabilize the state itself, although this is not the intended goal. State stability is no longer related to origin, but rather to the degree to which social structures overlap with regime structures ... in the form of social loyalty networks standing opposite other social groups that are excluded, as well as the willingness of ruling groups to divide society and use violence to confront any threat to their authority.⁸¹

This is a precise description of various countries since the Arab Spring revolutions. Bishara points to the distinctive nature of Syria as “a composite country containing multiple religious, sectarian, and ethnic groups”, which has hindered “the crystallization of an inclusive national identity that might have made it possible to separate society from the regime and the regime from the state”.⁸² The now-deposed regime, along with sectarian Alawite loyalty networks, an opportunistic minority from the Sunni majority and other national minorities, and a foreign, sectarian faction were all involved in unlawful violence that stripped the state itself of a measure of sovereignty and its monopoly over legitimate violence and lawmaking within its territory.

Moreover, over its decades in power, the deposed Syrian regime failed to institute programmes for social integration based on citizenship. When its authority was threatened, it deliberately inflamed sectarian tensions (Alawite vs. Shi'i vs. Sunni) and ethnonational divisions (Kurds vs. Arabs), plunging the country into a catastrophic cycle of violence. (Foreign interventions – some invited by the regime and others triggered by its actions – must also be taken into account.) The regime similarly stoked the fears of religious and sectarian minorities (Christians, Druze, Ismailis), presenting itself as their protector against an alleged threat posed by the Sunni majority.

Nevertheless, as Bishara notes, no serious separatist tendencies emerged in Syria. Rather, the state's weaknesses surfaced when the regime itself entered crisis, manifesting as “politicized social fractures”. The cleavages were exacerbated by the lack of social integration programmes and the eruption of a “conflict over the nature of the common national bond ... Is the bond a civic, an Arab nationalist, or a sectarian one? Nevertheless, all parties remain committed – in theory – to the unity of the state, even though – in practice – its territory is split between several de facto authorities and remains subject to the influences of numerous states. The international order also insists on the continued unity of the Syrian state”.⁸³

Here, Bishara inserts a prescient, if troubling, observation: “The question is whether that commitment will endure if the de facto partitions continue for much longer?”.⁸⁴ The scenario he ponders has become more likely since the fall of the totalitarian, sectarian regime and the attempts of regional parties to bolster separatist tendencies along sectarian lines, for example, Israel's claims of protecting the Druze.

The case of the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) is instructive. Representing sub- or pre-national ethnic affiliations (Kurdish, Arab, and Syriac) and even supra-national political extensions of these identities (for example, the Kurdistan Workers Party, at least ideologically, if not organizationally),

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 18.

⁸² Azmi Bishara, *Sūriyya: Darb al-Ālām nahw al-Ḥurriyya* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2013), p. 31; published in English as: Azmi Bishara, *Syria 2011–2013: Revolution and Tyranny before the Mayhem* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2023).

⁸³ Bishara, *al-Dawla al-'Arabiyya*, pp. 357-358.

⁸⁴ Ibid., pp. 23, 357-358; Bishara, *Mas'alat al-Dawla*, p. 333.

the SDF attempted to hold local elections in the areas under its control several months before the fall of the Assad regime. This was, essentially, an attempt to invest its monopoly on violence in Syrian territory east of the Euphrates with democratic legitimacy.

Yet its control over this territory rests on the logic of force and lacks any legitimacy beyond the de facto. Although the SDF referred to legitimacy derived from “a social contract”, Syrians were not consulted in the matter, and citizenship in a modern Syrian state does not appear to constitute a foundational value of that contract. Indeed, the mere presentation of a social contract in this form reveals a profound confusion, and in some cases, ignorance. Detached from its basic premises or from any possibility of application in relation to existing conditions, obstacles, and factors for success, such usage highlights the conceptual distortions surrounding the term “social contract” itself.

Other Syrian communities categorically rejected the SDF's attempt, and the international order has neither encouraged nor supported it. Thus far, it continues to recognize only the Syrian state in its pre-revolutionary form. Nevertheless, the spiral of violence that divided the country into three spheres of influence, the subsequent fall of the regime, and the rise of separatist tendencies emerging from these cleavages – among the Druze in Jabal al-Arab in the south, the Alawites on the western coast, and the Kurds in the east – raise concerns about the future of Syria as a single state, even in the form of a confederation, which seems the most realistic prospect.⁸⁵

Across the Arab region, the reality of the state, its political borders, and the scope of its territorial sovereignty are in flux. Sudan has already split into two internationally recognized states following a referendum, and the implications of the current conflict between the official government and the Rapid Support Forces militia are unclear. Elsewhere, there is partition, competing spheres of influence, and quasi-state political entities, as exemplified by Syria (three zones of influence before the fall of the regime: the regime, the SDF, and the opposition), Yemen (three main spheres of influence: the official government, the Houthis, and the Southern Transitional Council), Libya (where the relationship between east and west has evolved into a near confederation), Somalia (Somaliland is effectively independent though lacks international recognition), and Iraq (the Kurdistan region is poised for secession should a referendum in favour be approved and supported by the international community).

Therefore, as a matter of principle, we cannot depend on the post-independence Arab state as a stable reality, as it has not yet been thoroughly consolidated. Its political borders, Bishara argues, have been maintained by its own self-propelled momentum: “the interests of its authorities and institutions in imposing state sovereignty over territory and population, the expansion of the state apparatus and the extension of its reach, the rise of broad social groups dependent on the state for their livelihood, and the defence of state borders against neighbours. We should also not ignore the fear that questioning existing borders would unleash outright chaos in the region. For the same reason, the so-called international order has preserved these borders as recognized states”,⁸⁶ despite the reality of persistent division and strife. In other words, a considerable distance still separates the Arab state from the model of the modern state outlined by Bishara, which is a democratic state grounded in a general ethical principle based on citizenship as an essential facet of legitimacy and sovereignty.

Existing Arab states are beset by problems that prevent them from realizing justice for their citizens. Justice is inseparable from the state, from citizenship construed as an integral part of it, and from the

⁸⁵ For more on the SDF elections, see: Alaa Rajab Tabab, “Intikhābāt ‘Qasd’: Tafāwuḍ ‘alā Istihyā’ wa-Ilghā’ bi-Nakhat al-Ta’jīl,” Al Jazeera, 8 June 2024, accessed on 12/3/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zRc6%D8%9B;“al-‘Aqd al-Ijtīmā’i li-l-Idāra al-Dhātīyya li-Shamāl wa-Sharq Sūriyya, Ṭab’at 2023,” Rojava Information Centre, accessed on 23/3/2025, at: https://acr.ps/1L9zQLb>

⁸⁶ Bishara, *al-Dawla al-‘Arabiyya*, pp. 126, 435-436, 439-440.

instruments of social integration, which constitute a foundation on which the contemporary modern state-nation must be built.⁸⁷ Arab regimes have failed – or not even tried – to attain this ideal, resulting in a regression to sub- and supra-national communal affiliations and giving rise to grave civil conflicts, including bloody wars in Syria, Yemen, Libya, Iraq, and Lebanon.

On the surface, the crisis appears to be one of state legitimacy rather than a crisis of failed regimes. Justice thus remains out of reach precisely because the Arab state lacks social integration programmes based on citizenship and has been compromised by neoliberalism (in the Arab case, economic liberalization rather than political liberalization or democratization). These conditions have undermined social rights and eroded forms of equality and empowerment. Accordingly, citizenship, as a composite of rights and duties, remains an unresolved issue, amounting to “merely formal membership [in the state], synonymous with nationality, a bond too insubstantial to constitute the cornerstone of the state ... A tension thus arose between the reality of the Arab state and the modern conceptualization of the state”.⁸⁸ In this reality, the groundwork for democratic transition and for progression toward some form of social democracy, understood as a reasonable balance between political and non-political freedoms, equality, and economic empowerment, remains absent. This, I argue, is both the prerequisite and the aspiration of Bishara's project in the Arab region.

The reality of the Arab state points not only to the diminishing plausibility of political unity – whether under Arab nationalist or Islamist banners, both of which have become little more than utopian fantasies – but also to the further fragmentation of an already divided political landscape. The Arab state did not arise “to instantiate a moral principle, for example, to manifest the rights of an ethnocultural or national group”, which undermined “the state's role as a moral authority”.⁸⁹ As a result, the instrumentalist rationality necessary in a modern state was warped, reduced to a rationality aimed solely at the perpetuation of power rather than the pursuit of the common good.

The most important powers were concentrated in the hands of the ruler, and his office, if not the person himself, became a symbol of national sovereignty. This, in turn, “distorted the modern concept of sovereignty, reintroducing a latter-day sultanism into the authoritarian regimes of modern Arab republics and monarchies”.⁹⁰ The affairs of the state and its institutions were subordinated to the decisions of the ruler and to the often opportunistic, sycophantic clique around him.⁹¹

Arab unity was of little concern to Arab rulers and their regimes, whose primary interest lay in maintaining power, though the regimes of Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt, Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, Saddam Hussein in Iraq, and Bashar al-Assad and Hafez al-Assad in Syria continued to propagate pan-Arab ideologies and slogans. The Syrian regime, for example, did not preserve the country's unity and sovereignty within the framework of the state, as evidenced by the emergence of competing spheres of influence, repeated violations of sovereignty through foreign intervention, the loss of its monopoly on legitimate violence, and its own involvement in illegitimate violence. At its core and in its practices, the regime was always a sectarian one, rather than Syrian or Arab nationalist. As Bishara writes:

In all events, pan-Arab unity never materialized, and its historical moment has passed. The existence of established sovereign states is now an irrefutable reality that cannot be circumvented. Even attempts to unify existing states in the name of pan-Arabism failed, largely because authoritarian regimes were loath to relinquish a fraction of their state's sovereign authorities, which they regarded

⁸⁷ Bishara, *Maqāla fī al-Hurriyya*, p. 189.

⁸⁸ Bishara, *al-Dawla al-'Arabiyya*, p. 115.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 451-452.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 452.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

as their own. Arab nationalism never realized its aspiration of uniting Arabs under one state, but nor did existing states manage to produce cohesive national identities ... due to weak citizenship.⁹²

Ultimately, continues Bishara, national identities did emerge: "They were not local, ethnocultural alternatives to Arab nationalism; rather, they were national identities in which the Arab ethnocultural component helped shape the identity of the majority, while alternatives informed by the rejection of Arab nationalism became sub-national identities".⁹³ In this context, Bishara asserts that the Arab state and the Arab nation neither fully overlap nor contradict each other: "Integration among citizen-based states, in which Arab nationalism informs the identity of the ethnic majority, can be a realistic goal".⁹⁴

The ideological, unionist discourse, whether Arab nationalist or Islamist, that discredited the legitimacy of the existing Arab state has retreated. The trend today is toward greater communal and geographic fragmentation (in Syria, Yemen, Libya, Iraq, and Somalia). Yet this fragmentation is primarily a consequence of the erosion of regime legitimacy, rather than a failure of the legitimacy of the state itself.

The problem stems from the failure to realize civic integration and strengthen society rather than sub-state groups. A weak state, Bishara asserts, implies "a weak society and strong communal groups", while a strong society "can only be found in the framework of a strong state that enjoys public legitimacy". He continues that the main source of weakness in the Arab state "lies in the politicization of communal social structures" and the loyalty given to these communities over the state.⁹⁵ Any effort to further weaken the Arab state and undermine its legitimacy would hinder democratization and the rise of civil society, encouraging communal tendencies not grounded in citizenship and its imperatives.⁹⁶

Arab regimes monopolized the political – and entire public – sphere by suppressing all opposition, particularly organized national parties. The alternative was the eruption of the spontaneous, unorganized popular revolutions of the Arab Spring. When those, too, were brutally quelled, this gave rise to violent oppositions growing out of sub-and supra-national communal social structures. This development imperilled state sovereignty itself due to the entanglement between regime and state. The result was direct foreign intervention and the erosion of the state's monopoly on legitimate violence. Bishara warned of this trajectory early on:

The concept of civil society may be useful in the Arab battle for democracy if it is understood historically, i.e., critically, by revealing its historical limits and exposing its latent potential. But it could also damage the cause of democracy and the liberation of Arabs if it becomes a tool to politically neutralize the cause and sideline the question of the system of government.⁹⁷ The aspirational Arab state – a modern state with a politically active civil society that can achieve democracy – is thoroughly incompatible with the politicization of "communal social structures that reject the state's monopoly on legitimate violence and legislation".⁹⁸ This marks a major distinction from modern national forces struggling for power within the state, even if the latter resort to violence.⁹⁹

The Arab condition is precarious, with "deep social fissures penetrating even the state apparatus, weak citizenship in term of right and duties, a low sense of national affiliation compared to politicized sub-national

⁹² Ibid., p. 453.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 455.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 454.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 455.

⁹⁷ Bishara, *al-Mujtama' al-Madani*, p. 19.

⁹⁸ Bishara, *al-Dawla al-'Arabiyya*, p. 449

⁹⁹ Ibid.

affiliations, and poorly performing non-coercive state institutions”.¹⁰⁰ This explains the risks (or rather, the disastrous outcomes) of attempts to overthrow regimes through revolution or foreign intervention, such as Iraq in 2003 and Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Sudan since 2011. The result in each case has been the collapse of the state apparatus and the transformation of conflicts over the state into civil wars between groups.

In such cases, regime change through “gradual reform” is a safer bet, but it is now far too late. As Bishara writes, angry crowds who take to the streets in spontaneous uprisings against injustice are unlikely (nor should they be expected) to heed such cautions or internalize theories of the state or the diagnoses of social and political scientists.¹⁰¹ Even the elites who led the Arab Spring uprisings profoundly misapprehended slogans and demands concerning the state, the regime, freedom, justice, civil society, citizenship, democracy, and other issues to which Bishara has been drawing our attention for some three decades.

Conclusion

Employing a cross-disciplinary approach, Bishara's theorizing on the state represents important, original contributions to contemporary political thought. While Rawls is concerned with the political ideal of a state governed by an existing liberal democratic regime, with the goal of realizing social egalitarianism, Bishara aspires to attaining a realistic version of this ideal in the Arab context, which continues to be plagued by profound problems in state consolidation and durability, and where attempts at democratic transition have repeatedly faltered.

Notably, Bishara disagrees with social contract approaches to understanding the state and explaining its origins and development. Rawls's work, in contrast, builds on social contract theory, although his focus is less on the state and its evolution than on constructing the ideal form of an already existing state within a society possessing liberal democratic traditions – what he calls a “well-ordered society”.

Bishara's theory of the state describes a relatively realistic political utopia. It outlines an aspirational model of the state which is, in principle, both achievable and replicable in the future. Although the contemporary Arab reality falls short of this ideal, the circulation of these propositions within intellectual, political, elite, legislative, revolutionary, reformist, and broader cultural circles could trigger a feedback loop that shapes tendencies and practices. More importantly, it may generate a tension between the arguments and concepts embedded in these propositions and reality, which could catalyse further developments in both theory and practice.

Bishara explicitly incorporates citizenship into the definition of the modern state, distinguishing the state from its functions, origins, and evolution. He makes a compelling argument for the importance of citizenship in enabling the state's transition toward democratic governance. His emphasis on citizenship, as integral to the definition of the state, as a system of rights and duties, and as intimately linked to civil society and justice, appears in the context of his broader efforts to uphold liberal democracy, which, based on his approaches to citizenship and justice, is socially egalitarian in nature.

Arab states remain far from the political ideal described by Bishara. Not only are aspirations for unity unattainable, whether in the name of Arab or Islamic nationalism, but in some cases the national state itself is undergoing further fragmentation. While this may reflect a crisis of state legitimacy, it is, in reality, a crisis of ruling regimes that have failed to achieve social integration grounded in citizenship. As a result, communal affiliations have gained ascendancy, becoming the basis for civil strife and contributing to the

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 455.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., pp. 455-456.

erosion of state sovereignty and of the state's monopoly on legitimate violence and lawmaking within its territorial borders. In cases like Syria before the collapse of the Assad regime, ruling authorities themselves have engaged in illegitimate violence and have invited in or attracted foreign forces, further infringing upon state sovereignty. Consequently, Arab states still lack a politically active civil society that can confront existing regimes in order to push the state toward democracy.

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