Speech by **Michel Touma**, Lebanese journalist, at the symposium on " Religion and Human Rights " - Utah - October 2013.

The theme of this symposium, "Religion and Human Rights", has never been more important than it is today. The upheavals that followed the popular uprisings in several Arab countries - the so-called "Arab Spring" - have brought forth to the surface, especially in the circles of the new authorities, political movements based on religious affiliation. These political movements are religious or fundamentalists to varying degrees depending on the countries. They are more or less powerful, depending on the country.

We are now witnessing in the Middle East the rise of religion in political practice. The Arab revolutions have been a real catalyst in the rise of religion in politics. In light of these changes, the Middle East is the theater of serious social issues. It is the scene of a struggle between different schools of thought, among different society projects. In this context, I will explain in my remarks how, in the case of a pluralistic society, Lebanon is a model, a possible solution to the current upheavals, precisely in order to preserve human rights, civil liberties, the rights of the various communities living together in a pluralistic society. In a word, I will explain how Lebanon is a model that preserves the values of the free world that you are, here in the United States, the standard-bearers. I will also mention what kind of danger is threatening the Lebanese model, and how it constitutes also a threat to the United States in particular, and the free world in general. In this context I am referring, specifically, to Hezbollah and jihadist Sunnite movement, among which the latter includes the Qaeda and affiliated organizations, which are the most prominent.

For more than five decades, Arab countries have lived in a state of genuine political hibernation. They were ruled by dictators who emanated, in most cases, from military coups. These totalitarian powers have gradually been transformed into mafia powers whose backbone consisted of true repressive family clans, that suppressed aggressively any dissenting tone. This state of political hibernation could not persist. It was broken in early 2011 by the Arab Spring.

After decades of frustration and oppression, it was natural that the popular uprisings lead to an inflation of political parties and diverse political factions. This is a classic phenomenon. As part of this inflation of various political factions, it was expected that the fundamentalist and jihadist organizations would be reinforced. I say "reinforce" because these parties existed in a latent state. They were "underground".

In this context, we must distinguish between two different streams : Islamic terrorist organizations that advocate and use violence to impose by terror their vision of society based solely on Sharia, and Islamic political movements that adapt to democratic practices in a power struggle with the issue limited to the country concerned. In other words, a power struggle with the issue which does not fall within a transnational geopolitical project that goes beyond the

borders of the country concerned. These Islamic currents that can be described as "moderate" consider that Sharia should be one of the sources, not the only source of political systems. This is the case of the ruling parties in Turkey and Tunisia, among others.

To these two Islamic currents we can add   liberal political factions advocating a truly democratic civil state, which can safeguard the rights and freedom of all members of the society.

In most Arab countries that have witnessed revolutions since the beginning of 2011, there is a struggle between these three currents, these three social projects. Apparently, somehow, the United States and the West in general, are directly affected by the struggle between these three currents. In the event extremist Islamic organizations win, or even if they are strengthened and able to impose their rules of the game, they will be able, then, to transpose their struggle within Western societies in a second step. We have already witnessed in some Western countries, specifically in Europe, the beginning of a Muslim fundamentalist activism. If nothing is done to strengthen liberal democratic currents in the Middle East, the next target of the extremist Islamic project will be Western societies.

It is precisely at this level that emerge the importance of the Lebanese model, or rather the model that has been so far Lebanon. To understand the importance of the Lebanese model in the current context of the rise of religion in political practices, one must understand the structure of the Lebanese political system and the structure of the Lebanese society.

One point should be first clarified. If we think that the Lebanese system is a model, it is because we live in the East. We live in a region that is the cradle of the three monotheistic religions, a region where religion and religious values are deeply rooted in society. At Islam, leading to MO, the idea of a possible separation of religion and state is in a strong opposition. It becomes increasingly difficult, even impossible in some cases, to admit in most countries of the region a state law that is not largely inspired by Islamic Sharia. At this doctrinaire, growing exacerbation of ancestral tensions between Sunnites and Shiites will emerge.

In a more general way, the clan and family ties, and more community allegiances remain very deep in this part of the world. The XIV th century, sociologist and historian of Tunisian origin Ibn Khaldun had analyzed the phenomenon of " assabiya ", that is to say allegiance to the social group, the clan and community group, unique to this region.

So it is in light of this reality, unique to this region of the Middle East, that we must perceive the Lebanese political system. This system is based on communitarism, or what we call in our country sectarianism. In short: there are 18 religious communities in Lebanon. The political system is designed so that each community is represented at all levels of power, that is to say ~~in~~ at the legislative, executive, judicial, military etc. levels. Each community is represented according to a specific quota. In practice, the president is a Maronite Christian, the prime minister is a Sunnite Muslim, the Speaker of the House of Deputies is Shiite Muslim. The commander of the army and the Governor of the Central Bank are Maronite Christians, their

assistants are Muslims. The government and the House of Representatives are trained to half of Muslims and Christians, regardless of the demographic weight of Christians and Muslims. And every Christian and Muslim community is represented according to a specific quota.

But more important than this power-sharing, each community has its own schools, their own universities, their own political parties, its own social and sports clubs, associations of its own scouts, its own hospitals and charities, its own newspaper, its own media, its own radio and its own TV channels and finally its own religious courts. This social structure allows to preserve the rights and freedoms of each community, and each component of the Lebanese society. In short, this social structure which preserves the rights and freedom of each component of the Lebanese society prevents a specific community to impose its will or values on others.

What few people know, especially in the West, is that this Lebanese model is not new. This communitarian system is not a consequence of the war. This system goes way back in the history of Lebanon. It dates back to the time of the Ottoman Empire. It is deeply rooted in the Lebanese social fabric. In 1861, for example, representatives of the Ottoman Empire and the five great powers of the time (France, England, Russia, Prussia, Austria) decided to set up in Mount Lebanon a political system called " the Moutassarifiya " based on communities . This system provided a structure whereby Mount Lebanon would be governed by a " Moutassarif ", a non-Lebanese Christian, appointed by the Sublime Porte, assisted by a committee of 12 members, in which the six main communities were be represented (2 Maronites, 2 Greek Orthodox, 2 Greek Catholics, 2 Sunnites, 2 Shiites and 2 Druze). Key administrative positions were evenly distributed on a sectarian basis, each position being assigned to a specific community.

In 1926, under the French mandate, the French High Commissioner, general Maurice Sarrail, who was known for his anti-clerical positions, tried to abolish the communautarism system. But this attempt was an outcry in the local media. The French government has been forced to shelve Sarrail and replaced him by Henry de Jouvenel who restored the communautarism system. At the same time, a questionnaire was sent to 180 representatives of various regions and communities about which the political system should be adopted.

One of the questions dealt with the issue of whether the distribution of seats in Parliament should be done on a sectarian basis. From the 180 notable surveyed, 121 sent to the French High Commissioner a petition in which they decided to maintain the confessional system. They insisted on this on the following main arguments, as reported by the archives of the French State:

1 - "The Lebanese people consists of several communities, each having religious beliefs, mentality, customs and traditions. The rejection of the system of confessional representation would upset the balance and give precedence to certain communities at the expense of. others. The result could be jealousy, resentment and perhaps continual troubles."

2 - "The parliamentary representation should reflect the face of the country and as it is divided into several communities, it is necessary that these communities are represented, otherwise the representation would not be accurate."

3 - "The confessional representation safeguard the rights of minorities and leaves no room for complaints."

4 - "The communities in Lebanon take the place of political parties."

This document dates from 1926...

It is in the light of such a religious pluralism that Lebanon has established a mission of country refuge for persecuted minorities in the region. This vocation homeland refuge for religious minorities has been made possible by the recent centuries geographical terrain of Lebanon. Lebanon is mainly composed of two parallel chains of high mountains which form a kind of separation from the Arab and Muslim hinterland. These high mountains allowed religious minorities to meet the invaders, thus preserving their freedoms and rights.

It is this system of social and political structure that allowed for centuries to preserve the rights of different religious communities in Lebanon.

The Lebanese model is threatened. It is threatened first by Hezbollah. Hezbollah is a Shiite extremist party that has a political project, strategy, values that exceed the Lebanese context and that are directly related to the strategy of Iran. For Hezbollah, for example, all the major strategic policy decisions, including the decision of war and peace, are the responsibility of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution in Tehran. It is written in the ideology of Hezbollah, as explained in a reference book written by the number two of Hezbollah, Sheik Naim Kassem. As part of this strategy, Hezbollah receives a huge help, political, military, economic, financial and logistics. As a result of this assistance, and as a result of its weapons and huge financial resources coming from Iran, Hezbollah was able to impose its will on other communities and political parties to serve the strategic interests of Iran. This diktat imposed by Hezbollah is undermining all the foundations of the Lebanese model, based on the balance between the communities and the preservation of liberty and the rights of each community.

Lebanese model is also threatened by Sunnite jihadists and extremists organizations in Lebanon. These organizations are, of course, minority and marginal, they are rejected by the Sunnite social environment, but they begin to grow in importance and become stronger because of the attitude and the totalitarian strategy of the pro- Iranian Hezbollah.

If nothing is done to weaken the Shiite and Sunni extremist currents, if nothing is done to strengthen the liberal trends in Lebanon, Christians and Muslims, the next step of the struggle of these radical organizations will be within Western societies, as it begins to be felt in some European countries, as these extremist organizations say themselves. In this sense, the current

struggle in Lebanon and some Arab countries between liberal and democratic parties on the one hand, and radical Islamic factions, Sunnites and Shiites, on the other hand, is an issue that will affect sooner or later Western countries.

Some scholars point out that the world has become a global village. In fact, what is happening today in the Middle East concerns also, to a large extent, Western societies and may affect long-term Western societies and the values promoted by Western countries.