

“Freedom Is the Foundation of Political Life” .. Interview with George Sabra



□ Syria today is moving along a path it has not known for decades one in which questions of identity intertwine with the demands of state-building, and in which the first stirrings of newfound freedom intersect with the heavy burden of a long authoritarian legacy. Talk of parliament, parties, transitional justice and citizenship has become an imperative that occupies the street as much as the elite, imposed by realities before theories.

□ In this interview, prominent Syrian politician George Sabra examines the realities of the transitional phase through a lens that combines political realism with a historical perspective, pausing at the issues of justice, representation, freedoms and citizenship, as well as the internal stakes and regional pressures Syria faces pressures that are plain for all to see

□ George Sabra, a Syrian politician born in 1947, is one of the most prominent opposition figures against the Assad regime. He is a member of the Syrian Democratic People’s Party and one of the founders of the Damascus Declaration for National Democratic Change in 2005. He was arrested numerous times because of his political activity and spent years behind bars.

He later headed the Syrian National Council in the period following the outbreak of the revolution, and for decades remained one of the steadfast civilian voices in the Syrian opposition landscape.

To the interview..

□How does the political life taking shape in Syria today look to you, in light of the rapid changes taking place in state institutions and the public sphere?

□I believe it is still too early to speak of “political life” in Syria. After more than six decades of authoritarianism, politics was turned into a forbidden and criminalized act, while despotic rulers — individuals and organizations alike — were given free rein to ravage public life in the country as they pleased and in line with their private interests.

We still need more time and effort to restore politics to its proper place between authority and the people, especially within popular circles in all their varied affiliations, orientations, ideas and interests, so that it can be codified, organized, and its practice and role arranged in a way that enriches public affairs, indeed, helps build and reform them as well.

Our national history in the 1950s, after independence and the end of French rule, reminds us of the rich political life our forefathers built, which became a dream for their children and grandchildren and remains so to this day.

□The scale of the comprehensive destruction inherited by the new authorities after the collapse of the defunct regime, their experimental approach, and the complexity of regional and international conditions all of which have brought risks to Syrian nationalism and threatened the unity of the land and the people make the task more difficult and hinder its swift accomplishment despite the great need for it. The new parliament is now set to begin its work before it is complete, and without any representatives from Sweida province among its active members.

□Yet the climate of freedoms Syrians are enjoying these days something we longed for over many decades will certainly lay the foundation for a new ground on which public life, in both its political and social dimensions, can be built, and through that, political currents, organizations and diverse civil society groups will take shape.

□Until they are organized, social media pages and forum activity will remain an arena for political parties to renew themselves and make their voices heard, especially those that worked for a long time under the difficult conditions of clandestine life inside the country and from abroad, so they can regain their presence and activity.

It also opens space for the birth of new political projects dozens of them, from different intellectual and political currents but all of them still remain beyond the bounds of vision and action, awaiting codification and organization through a political parties law to be issued by the legislative authority.

□Speaking of the new parliament, how do you assess the debate over the People’s Assembly, its powers and the mechanism for forming it? What does it need to become a truly representative institution in Syrian political life?

□It is only natural that debate over this issue should be heated among Syrians. The history of political life in the country demands it, and the urgent need for revival calls for it. Several generations lived under the slogan “With our soul, with our blood,” a symbol of obedience and submission to the ruler’s will, knowing nothing of constitutional life or the rule of law, and never practicing real elections not in unions, not in parliament, and not even in civic associations and organizations.

□The current transitional phase is the one that must cleanse public life of the sediment and distortions of that era, and properly restore the people’s presence in administrative institutions and in the organizations and structures of governance. What has made the matter more difficult and the tasks more complex is the presence of outside hands that have reached in to obstruct recovery and undermine Syrians’ presence as a unified society and an organized state.

□Securing a representative institution that truly reflects the will of the people remains contingent on establishing a serious and effective national dialogue, and on completing the transitional phase and successfully carrying out its tasks, with the aim of reaching the drafting of a new constitution, holding parliamentary and presidential elections, and completing the building of administrative institutions so that public life can be set right.

□If we turn to the issue of transitional justice, how do you read the path this file is taking?

□It is one of the most difficult files of the transitional phase — indeed, the most difficult — because of the vast scale of the violations, their horror and brutality, and their deep and wide reach across all parts of the country. Yet it is an indispensable task if the transitional phase is to produce positive results and Syria is to enter the promised national space of the new Syria.

□The task undertaken by the relevant specialized body, the “General Authority for Transitional Justice,” is a fundamental and central one, placing it under scrutiny and criticism, even though it is working seriously and diligently. This is especially so because it is operating and has begun legal procedures in the absence of a

specific transitional justice law, which has made the ongoing trials a subject of observation and criticism from some legal quarters, because the Syrian penal code is insufficient for trying perpetrators of crimes against humanity.

□I personally believe that the transitional justice file can and should accommodate organized popular and social participation alongside legal procedures and official bodies and institutions. The goal is to achieve civil peace by restoring rights to their owners and holding perpetrators accountable as individuals for their violations, so that we may reach national reconciliation and turn the page on the painful past and its aftermath.

That is the highest and final rung on the ladder of transitional justice, in order to move toward restoring Syria as a free homeland for all its people, far from injustice, hatred and revenge, for only the perpetrator of the crime bears responsibility for it.

□To what extent can equal citizenship be built within a society that has lived through long years of division, fear and fragmentation?

□Yes, Syrian society has lived through long years of “division, fear and fragmentation,” and I would add exclusion as well even from addressing its own issues and determining the affairs of its life and destiny. But it has also lived throughout its long historical life under its greatest truth: diversity. Pluralism is neither new nor incidental to Syrian life; it is measured not only in hundreds of years, but in thousands as well, and it has never been a deficiency in Syrian life, but rather a source of richness.

□That is why the historian Philip Hitti said: “Syria is the biggest little country on the map.” If it is small in geography, then what is great in it?

□Without a doubt, it is the people. Our forebears identified the safe shore amid this diversity with their slogan that emerged during the French Mandate and united them in the state of independence: “Religion is for God and the homeland is for all.” If Syrians were speaking a century ago about citizenship as the realization of the idea that the homeland belongs to everyone, and built the national state of independence on that basis, are we today, in the age of the modern state, incapable of achieving that?

□Fares al-Khoury did not govern as a Christian, and Sultan al-Atrash did not lead the Great Syrian Revolt as a Druze, nor did Ibrahim Hananu and Saadallah al-Jabiri. Even the Arab Academy of Damascus was founded by a Syrian Kurd, Muhammad Kurd Ali. Syrian nationalism, which saved the country, was the umbrella for all.

□How do you view the state of public freedoms and freedom of expression today,

especially with the expansion of political and media debate compared with previous periods?

□ There is no doubt that public freedoms and freedom of expression are the most prominent achievement realized by the transitional authorities. Since Dec. 8, 2024, Syrians have moved from an era of silence and fear of the security forces to one of familiarity with them and confidence in their protection; from a time when words were whispered hesitantly behind closed doors to one in which opinions ring out in public squares under the protection of the authorities.

□ It is a new era that Syrians earned through their struggle and sacrifices, not a favor or a gift from anyone. It is a reclaimed right, dearly won under divine and man-made laws alike, and it was one of the revolution's two goals from the outset in the chant “freedom and dignity.” The new authorities deserve appreciation and respect for providing and protecting this right. Public freedoms and freedom of expression are the only space in which human beings realize their humanity and citizens their existence.

□ Their availability covers for many of the shortcomings and mistakes committed by the authorities, whether individuals or organizations, so long as these are openly discussed and confronted through legal frameworks, peaceful means and within the constitutional rights of the citizen.

□ They also provide the authorities with the ability to know the truth of what is happening, the views of those concerned, and the repercussions of their decisions and measures, whether negative or positive. They give them the opportunity to address and correct matters at the appropriate time before the damage worsens. Farmers' public protest over this year's wheat pricing produced a revision of the price at record speed and prevented escalation, while the Bab Touma sit-in against the Damascus governor's decision regarding alcoholic beverages halted the dangers and harm and corrected the handling of an issue that did not need to be stirred up in the first place.

□ How do you see Syria taking shape over the coming years?

□ The Syrian revolution is a people's revolution, not the movement of a team, group or faction claiming paternity over it. Syrians showed courage and made sacrifices for it that are nearly unmatched in the global record of revolutions. That is why the new authorities, on whose hands those efforts and sacrifices bore fruit, have received this global attention and international support something Syria and Syrians deserve, in recognition of Syria's geopolitical importance through its location, history and the will of its people.

□ I see our new Syria as a free homeland for all its people, a parliamentary republic whose people enjoy constitutional life and the rule of law in a state of

equal citizenship in rights and duties, under a system of broad administrative decentralization across all provinces. A democratic system based on periodic transfer of power through free and fair elections remains the greatest guarantee of public life that is open politically, socially, intellectually and culturally, allowing Syrians to recover their historic luster among the countries of the region and on the global stage.

□I say this despite the many shortcomings and mistakes taking place at this stage, the absence of transparency and candor with the people, and the prevailing experimentalism in sensitive areas, along with weak and diverse popular participation in procedures and decision-making. Despite the availability of experienced and loyal specialists across various tasks and fields, Syrians note that appointments to positions of responsibility and decision-making are based on loyalty rather than expertise and the ability to contribute.

The hope is that the voice of the people will be able to set matters right.

□What do you fear most for the country’s future?

□The fears are many and serious, and they must exist. This is Syria, the heart of the Middle East, in the age of Trump, Netanyahu and accidental generals everywhere, and the dominance of brute force. Yet the most dangerous of them for us is Israel, its schemes and its ambitions; it does not want to see a state in Syria, amid an Arab condition that is helpless and saddening, and an international situation that inspires suspicion and stirs fears.

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