

## **Democracy, Pluralism and Political Ethics in Middle East**



In an interview with Prof. Abdulaziz Sachedina

Conducted By: Dr. Sabah Mofidi

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Abdulaziz Abdulhussein Sachedina hails from Tanzania (originally is from India) and he was educated in Tanzania, India, Iran, Iraq, and Canada. After completing the school in Tanzania, he traveled to India and did his B.A. General in Philosophy, Political Science, and Islamic Studies at Aligarh Muslim University. Then, he did another bachelor's degree in Persian language and literature in Ferdowsi University of Mashhad and he simultaneously received seminary (religious) education in Iran. During his stay in Iran, he was strongly influenced by Dr. Ali Shariati as one of his students. Afterwards, he traveled to Canada, started his education at the University of Toronto in 1971, and got his MA and PhD in Middle East and Islamic Studies. After graduating in 1976, at the same year he joined the University of Virginia, the Department of Religious Studies, and remained there until 2011. Now, he is Chair, Religious Studies and Professor of Islamic Studies in International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) at George Mason University, Virginia. He has also taught at other Universities and institutes in US, Canada, Iran, Iraq, Jordan and so on. He has been teaching courses on Classical Islam, Islam in the Modern Age, Islam, Democracy and Human Rights, Islamic Bioethics and Muslim Theology. Because of his pluralist view on religions, Ayatollah Sistani issued a statement (fatwa) against him in 1998 that advised Muslims not to listen to his talks or to ask him questions about religious matters. In addition to his work at the university, he has been a consultant to the United States Department of State and Department of Defense, regarding the spiritual and moral dimensions, Middle Eastern affairs, and the question of the freedom of religion in Islam and related topics. In this relation, he was also an adviser to those drafting the Constitution of Iraq that was put into effect in 2005. His doctoral dissertation was published under *Islamic Messianism* in 1980. Some of his other works are *The Just Ruler in Shi'ite Islam (al-sultan al-'adil)*, 1988, *Human Rights and the Conflict of Cultures*, 1988, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism*, 2002, *The Islamic World: Past and Present*, 2004, *Islamic Biomedical Ethics*, 2009, *Islam and the Challenge of Human Rights*, 2009.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The interview was published at first in Kurdish on the website of the Kurdistan Conflict and Crisis Center (KCCRC). To see its Kurdish version, see: <http://www.kurdistancc.com/Islamic/details.aspx?jimare=5358>

<sup>2</sup> For more information about the life of Prof. Sachedina, please see his interview with <[Maydan.com](http://www.maydan.com)>, 2017, at: <https://www.themaydan.com/2017/09/interview-abdulaziz-sachedina-life-scholarship/>

**KCCRC:** It is better to commence with the question that, according to your studies on socio-political ethics, what is your definition of political ethics? Is there any moral justification and ethical basis for decision-making of a political stream affiliated to a community instead of another community without regarding the vote of its people, while the communities have different situations?

**Prof. Sachedina:** Ethics in general require an honest assessment of right and wrong, beneficial and harmful, approved and unapproved, praiseworthy and blameworthy. Politics is the public management of the trust of the people: their sovereignty, their finances, their infrastructures, and their overall public good, and so on. On all these functional counts, any government is morally required to adhere to the constitution and laws of that country. The collective good is a moral goal and requires moral-civil authority to demonstrate to the citizenry that it is doing the best for its people, without causing harm and distortion to the goals of a good political management. The communities universally expect their governance to be constitutional and democratic, respecting the rights of the people and defending their dignity.

***“Religious or non-religious political ethics  
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the UDHR.”***

**KCCRC:** In relation to the religious political ethics, how do you see the relationship between Islam and democracy and also Islam and human rights? In Iran some groups especially the dominant political trend emphasize on “Islamic Human Rights”. In your opinion, is it correct to add the word “Islamic”, while “human” cannot be declined to just Muslim people and others be excluded?

**Prof. Sachedina:** Religious or non-religious political ethics have to be founded on the universal principles of international human rights declaration (UDHR). Conceptually it is not possible to conceive of religious human rights simply because all humans are equal bearers of rights whether they are believers or not. No religion admits that equality for all diverse faith communities. Hence, it is nothing more than apologetics to speak about “Islamic” or “Christian” human rights. The major principle that guarantees human rights for all people, regardless of their

faith, creed, race or gender, is the idea of citizenship. Such an idea is absent in all major world religions that divide humanity in believers and nonbelievers. Citizenship is the most inclusive notion that connects peoples of diverse faiths and cultures together in a modern nation state.

**KCCRC:** As far as we know, you have a pluralist view on religions. Why have some of the religious Shiite clergies especially in Iraq opposed your opinion?

**Prof. Sachedina:** Belief in pluralism does away with exclusive claims of truth and salvation. Religious authorities everywhere shun the idea of sharing their exclusive claim to truth and salvation with other religions. Hence, not only Muslim religious establishment, but also the Christian and other religious groups entertain that exclusive theology to claim the sole proprietary over salvation and religious truth. The Qur'an takes pluralism of faith as a divine mystery and advises humanity to engage in doing good to each other without fighting over whose religion is superior (Q. 5:48).

***“Belief in pluralism  
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**KCCRC:** In your opinion, why have the dominant Iranian Shiite clergies practically opposed any diversity and the rights of other religions and sects and even ethnicities and cultures (While Qur'an respects them)? Many injustices and discriminations are seen in Iran. Instead of a peaceful and just way through negotiation and real irenic coexistence, the Shiite State has practically used force and violence to suppress the religious, ethnic and socio-political civic movements as the only solution up to now. Why it, contrary to its claims as an Islamic State, has not been able to make justice among the people and communities inside Iran? (For example, apart from the non-Muslim peoples, most of the Kurdish, Balouch, Turkmen Sunni Muslims believe that their socio-political group rights are not regarded in Iran and there are many discriminations).

**Prof. Sachedina:** Let us keep in mind that politics deals with issues in a starkly different way than the religion does. There is a deep seated distrust of the minorities in all cultures,

including Iranian. The Sunni Arab world has interfered with Sunni minorities in Iran and has even supported extremists and Islamic State (da'ish) financially and ideologically to cause discontent and dissension in the local Sunni communities and their Iranian hosts. Hence, while it is true that there is discrimination against the Sunnis in Iran, it is important to understand the disloyalty of the minorities and their alliance with Sunni da'ish or Islamic state. Iraq under Saddam is a good example of how utterly the Arab Sunni governments failed to raise moral and legal issues against the dominant Sunni rulers under Saddam, who never hesitated to torture and *killen masse* the Shiites of Iraq for almost four decades under the Ba'thists. Political hypocrisy is a grave sin and it has gripped the entire Arab Sunni world in their dealings with Iran, Iraq or Lebanese Shiites.

***“I believe the Kurds  
have a right to  
their own state.”***

**KCCRC:** As you know, in real democratic countries the level of democracy and equality is to the extent that the people of a place don't allow themselves to decide instead of the people of other places. For example in Canada, Quebec referendum for independence as a democratic way has been accepted and it is easily enforced. But in Middle East, equal rights for different peoples are not regarded, while there is the claim of Islamic justice. For example, Kurds with a population of about 40 million, the majority of whom are Muslims, have not a State on their own land and have been suppressed, but Arabs have many States even with very little population. How do you see the effect of religion on the weakness of democratic subjectivity (mentality) and tradition in the region? Has this dual and unequal manner between so-called Muslim brothers an ethical and religious justification?

**Prof. Sachedina:** Let me be clear that I believe the Kurds have a right to their own state (united Kurdistan). However, let us face the reality of the oil wells and other mineral resources that are divided between Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey, who do not want to give up these natural resources, when it comes to recognizing the rights of the Kurds for self-determination. In addition, what do we mean by “Islamic” justice? Justice is independent value that informs

humanity to uphold it at all times whether the system is religious or secular. Let us not bring Islam in between when the Qur'an regards justice as an ingrained value in all human beings, and which God will call for accounting whether I am a Muslim or not. There is no escape from divine justice. Many a times, religion and ethics are abused by the religious and non-religious people to justify their atrocities and discriminatory policies like South Africa or USA.

***“As long as there is violation of  
human rights of ANY people  
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**KCCRC:** You were among the advisers to codify the constitution of Iraq after Saddam. As you know, constitution is like a social contract that the main communities and their political organizations are its parties that all of them should have assent and agreement. It should assure the interests of all parties and consider a democratic way of withdrawing when the parties are unsatisfied. When there is no a democratic subjectivity especially on the level of central government and most of the Arab Iraqi politicians have not it, and there are crucial cleavages and conflicts among the main communities (Kurd, Shiite Arab and Sunni Arab) and there is no a possible to peaceful coexistence, why was not a democratic exit way considered? Is it not against ethics, democracy and human rights to keep the communities together by force?

**Prof. Sachedina:** Advisors provide guidance; they don't write constitutions. Moreover, the role of USA was always lurking behind all constitutional decisions being made about Iraq at that early stage. Let me also add another reality to the constitutional debate that not all parties were represented in its writing. Those who participated were determined by the American government and their advisors and their supporters with Iraq political establishment. In brief, you are looking at the ideal situation that should have dominated the process. But, alas, that idealism was sacrificed early on to get the document guaranteeing constitutional democracy start off on time. The rest is history and it will be judged by insightful historians of the new Iraqi state.

**KCCRC:** In your opinion, why Iraqi government has not respected the vote of Kurdish people? When the articles of Iraqi constitution has not been implemented (for example article 140 that is

related to disputed areas between Baghdad and Kurdistan); it is violated by some political groups; the dominant Shiite groups are above the law and indeed there is no the rule of law; Kurdish people are aspiring to independence. Do not Kurds have the right to withdraw from the social contract of Iraq as one of its main parties, and declare their independence for equality with other Muslim nations?

**Prof. Sachedina:** Is there any difference between the Saddam government and the present government in the treatment of Kurdish self-government? Would you not have raised the same question that you raise for the present majority government for the Ba’thist government that killed Kurds in thousands in Halabja? In fact, when I was a visiting professor in the University of Jordan I was told by the Jordanians that it was not Saddam who killed the Kurds with chemical weapons; rather, it was Iran that did that!!! What do Muslim nations care about Kurds or, for that matter, for anyone but their atrocious rulers? You should put the questions about self-determination of the Kurds to the Arabs first and foremost and then take up the issue of who is engaged in the continuous injustices to them.

**KCCRC:** At last, how do you see the future of Middle East and especially Iraq?

**Prof. Sachedina:** As long as there is violation of human rights of ANY people there will be no peace in the ME. As long as there is no rule of law or accountability of those in power there will be injustice and mismanagement of the public resources and impending poverty. Iraq is not an exception. Although it has come a long and difficult way to achieve some of the universal rights of the people, it still is struggling for a better governance.