



# **Islam and Nationalism: A Theoretical Point of View**

**Authors(s): S. Ahmad Rahnamaei**

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**In this paper, the author examines the position of nationalism in Islam and whether or not it prevents Islam from fulfilling its role in developing a just society. He highlights the fact that nationalistic biases never stemmed from religion itself; rather, its followers possessed prejudices that often led to disputes.**

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## Introduction

Since the very beginning of its revelation to the world, Islam as the last divine law (Shari'ah) and as the global religion of nations has expressed its universal message through the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (S). The expression of its universal message continued with the sayings of the Imams after the Prophets. All Muslims have been encouraged towards a feeling of brotherly unity from the earliest days of Islam. All the faithful, as it is stated in the Qur'an, are brothers.<sup>1</sup> The Qur'an as the common sacred Book and the language of this Book, which is the language of all prayers and all theological and legal instruction, have "*established a medium of communication*" among Muslim nations.<sup>2</sup>

According to the Qur'an, Allah is the source of governing authority. He sent Prophet Muhammad as the final (and as the seal) of the prophets "*who was to repair and reconstruct the world into a monistic order.*"<sup>3</sup>

Embodied in the term Islam, the Prophet's teachings "*were to constitute the final and definitive religion to all people.*"<sup>4</sup> The term Islam, meaning 'surrender' or 'submission' to Allah, "*reflects the nature of the relation between Allah as governor and His people, the believers, as governed.*"<sup>5</sup> This concept forms part of the Islamic state.<sup>6</sup>

Nothing from within the religion causes Islam to restrict itself to one nationality rather than another. According to Islam, all races and nations are equal. The term millah (which is usually interpreted to refer to religious nationhood) appears in the holy book of Islam seventeen times, where it literally means religion or path.

Though the Qur'an was revealed in Arabic and the Prophet was of an Arab origin, and though Islam emerged in Arabia, this never meant that Islam or its Qur'anic and prophetic messages were destined for the Arab only. Rather they are explicitly declared to belong to humankind, to all people, in short to all who adhere to Islam as their religion, whichever nationality they belong to.

There are many Qur'anic verses that start with the formula "*Ya ayyuha al-nas*" (O, you people!), hence they are addressed to all people. The best example is the Qur'anic passage that is concerned with the original unity of man's creation, indicating that human beings are basically all descended from the same male and female. In the Qur'an there are words such as:

***O you mankind! surely We created you of a male and a female, and made you tribes and families that you may know each other; surely the most honourable of you with Allah is the one among you most careful (of his duty); verily Allah is Knowing, Aware. (49:13)***

The Qur'an was revealed to function as a Divine message to all the worlds: "*Verily, this is not but a message to all the worlds.*"<sup>7</sup>

Also, the Prophet was sent to be God's representative to all humankind (kaffah lin-nas). The Qur'an states:

***"We have not sent you but as a universal Messenger to humankind, giving them glad tidings and warning them ...." (34:28)***

Similarly,

***"Say, 'O human beings! I am sent unto you all, as the apostle of Allah."***  
(7:158)

He was also commissioned to be a mercy for all nations and creatures:

*“We sent you not, but as a mercy for all creatures.”(21:107)*

Thus, Islam and its Prophet are considered to be the message and the messenger respectively, to all people in general. According to some interpretations, true Islam teaches people to disregard what separates them and become one again. It tells those who have faith in God to strive and search for the same reality, disregarding the divisions of race, religion, or caste.<sup>8</sup>

## The Fundamental Elements of Nationalism

In order to understand the basic principles of nationalism, I must first consider its history from various perspectives. In his preface to his work *Nationalism: Its Meaning and History*, Hans Kohn states:

Nationalism has been one of the determining forces in modern history. It originated in eighteenth-century Western Europe; during the nineteenth century it spread all over Europe; in the twentieth century it has become a world-wide movement<sup>9</sup>...

... it was not until the end of eighteenth century that nationalism in the modern sense of the word became a generally recognized sentiment increasingly moulding all public and private life.<sup>10</sup>

Soekarno, the nationalist leader of Indonesia during the 1950s and 60s, writes in one of his works:

In 1882 Ernest Renan<sup>11</sup> expressed his views on the concept of the nation. A nation, he said, has a soul, an intellectual foundation, which consists of two things: first of all, a people must have shared a common history; secondly, a people must possess the will and desire to live as one. Neither race, language, religion, common needs nor state boundaries make a nation.<sup>12</sup>

Soekarno quoting Otto Bauer,<sup>13</sup> states that “*A nation is a unity of attitudes which derives from a unity of historical experience.*” Nationalism, from his point of view, “*is the conviction, the consciousness of a people that they are united in one group, one nation.*”<sup>14</sup>

In general, nationalism, as Soekarno explains, by its very nature excludes all parties who do not share the 'desire to live as one'; ... nationalism actually belittles all groups which do not feel that they are 'one group, one nation' with the people; ... Nationalism in principle rejects all attitudes which do not stem from a 'unity of historical experience.'<sup>15</sup>

In discussing the roots of nationalism, Hans Kohn remarks that Nationalism is a state of mind, in which the supreme loyalty of the individual is felt to be due to the nation-state. A deep attachment to one's native soil, to local traditions and to established territorial authority has existed in varying strength throughout history.<sup>16</sup>

The well-known American nationalist theoretician, Carlton Hayes, trying not to moor the word “*nation*” to any exact dictionary definition<sup>17</sup>, states that “*In simplest terms, nationalism may be defined as fusion of patriotism with a consciousness of nationality.*”<sup>18</sup> To understand the matter properly, some explanation of the term nationality is required. The word nationality, to Hayes, “*derives from the Latin Natio, implying a common racial descent, but few, if any, modern nationalities consist of a distinctive 'race' in the biological sense.*”<sup>19</sup>

He also states: “*Every nationality of which I have knowledge has been, or is, biologically and racially, a melting pot.*”<sup>20</sup>

From Hayes' point of view, traditions and language should be counted as the two bases of nationality. A nationality does not receive its impression, its character, its individuality, just from physical geography or biological race. In addition to these factors, cultural and historical forces in general and language in particular play a serious role in the formation of a nationality.<sup>21</sup>

Even if one alleges that factors such as race, language, homeland, etc. do not form the underlying principles of a nationality and nationalism, nationalist movements nevertheless always have these motives and tendencies at heart. In other words, there is always a subliminal inclination towards such factors among nationalists. Therefore, one cannot ignore the importance of these tendencies in promoting and maintaining a nationalist movement.

## Islam and the Traits of Nationalism

Ever since nationalism came into existence, it has always featured certain basic characteristics. In many ways these have proven to be inimical towards religious beliefs. The following are just some instances of this tradition as it has affected Islam.

1- Nationalism is a secular ideology according to which religion and state, politics and faith should be separated from one another. One of the mottos most often expressed by Egyptian nationalists was: *“The religion belongs to Allah, but the country belongs to all.”*<sup>22</sup>

What this statement intended to say was that religion is a personal issue which falls outside the framework of public life. Religious thought should not interfere with social-political decision-making, for it is the nation and not religion that deserves the loyalty of a society. Nationalism rejects religion's claim to be regarded as the fundamental element of unity. Accordingly, religion after all undermines national unity and causes religious minorities to live separate from each other. Nationalism teaches us that the only instrument of unity is human being's tendency towards geographical, racial and linguistic identification. For these reasons, nationalism encourages secularism and consequently, religion and everything else that is perceived as threat to national unity must be sacrificed for its sake.<sup>23</sup>

This attitude persists in spite of the fact that Islam was revealed to the Prophet to unify the World-wide Community and to regulate all dimensions of human life. It was the practice and sunnah of the Prophet to welcome every single individual no matter which nationality he belonged to. Among the Prophet's companions were Salman the Persian, Bilal the Abyssinian and Suhayb of Rum, all of whom helped the Prophet in administering the Islamic state.<sup>24</sup>

It is related that one of the Prophet's Arab companions named Qays once referred to these three as foreigners. When the Prophet heard this, he became angry and said, *“Both your father and your religion are the same, and the Arabism by which you are taking pride was never attributed to your original parents ....”*<sup>25</sup>

In the Qur'an those verses that highlight the identity of the Muslim Community (Ummah) never disregard the necessary role that religion played within everyday life. The concept of the ummah as a religio-political community connotes the presence of religion in all personal, social, earthly and heavenly aspects of life. The first leader of the ummah was the Prophet himself, then his successors who ruled as Caliphs according to Sunni tradition or as Imams according to that of the Shi'i tradition. Twelver Shi'i tradition also holds that during the occultation of the Imam, the Muslim Community is entrusted to the *“Guardianship [the Authority] of the Jurist”* (Wilayat al-Faqih), a system according to which a religious scholar (faqih) who possesses all or most of the requirements necessary to guide the community is entrusted with the leadership of the Muslim ummah.<sup>26</sup>

The leadership of Imam Khomeini during the first decade after the victory of the Islamic Revolution of Iran (1978-1989) is perhaps the best example of the Wilayat al-Faqih system. Today one of the most important articles in the

Iranian Constitution is that which sets forth the principles underlying this office.<sup>27</sup>

The Late Imam Khomeini declared in one of his speeches that *“If a faqih acts dictatorially on just one occasion, he loses his guardianship mandate.”* According to his view, if a faqih were to take a wrong step, or commit a minor sin, his guardianship would have to be revoked.<sup>28</sup>

As Hamid Dabashi elaborates,

Khomeini never appears explicitly in his speeches and correspondences to claim any power or demand any obedience for his person. Even in Velayat-Faqih (the Authority of the Jurist) he argues theoretically for the authority of the Jurist without ever explicitly, or even implicitly, indicating that he personally ought to occupy that position.<sup>29</sup>

The unity of religion and politics is regarded as one of the central elements of an Islamic government. Sayyid Hasan Mudarris (d.1938/39), a distinguished clergyman who represented the people in the Iranian parliament and finally was poisoned and martyred by King Reza Pahlavi, declared that *“The foundation of our politics is our religion,”*<sup>30</sup> and also professed that *“Our religion is the same as our politics and our politics is the same as our religion.”*<sup>31</sup>

Later on the same doctrine was espoused by Imam Khomeini. The Imam, opposing those who separate Islam from government and politics, remarks in his Final Discourse that:

... they need only be reminded that the Holy Qur'an and the traditions of the Messenger of God (S) have more edicts in relation to government and state craft than in any other areas. More importantly, many of the apparently devotional precepts in Islam are truly politico-devotional precepts, the overlooking of which has been responsible for the present afflictions of the Muslim world.<sup>32</sup>

He states furthermore that *“The Prophet of Islam (S) instituted a government like other governments of the world except that his was one for the purpose of promoting social justice ....”*<sup>33</sup>

2- Traditionally, nationality and the attachment to a homeland are the most authoritative criteria in assessing the virtue of a nation. To affirm this virtue, a nation should maintain a link with its history and culture.<sup>34</sup>

A good example was Iran during the time of the Pahlavi dynasty. There were many attempts made by the nationalists to persuade Iranians to relate to the early monarchy, concentrating on Cyrus and Darius the great kings of ancient Iran. One of the manifestations of this effort was the substitution of the Islamic calendar with that of the Iranian monarchical calendar in 1976. Hamid Dabashi states:

As yet another measure of his attempts to shift the cultural basis of his legitimacy from Islamic to Iranian symbolics, the monarch decided to alter this arrangement. He wished for the Iranian calendar, the one particularly dear to the nationalists, to begin not with the migration of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina, but, instead, to commence with the presumed date of the coronation of Cyrus the Great, the assumed royal progenitor with the man identified.<sup>35</sup>

Dabashi goes on to say that Ayatullah Khomeini then in Najaf, accusing such attempts and the ideas behind them, regarded them as *“the clear indications of the anti-Islamic designs of the regime and forbade Iranians from using the new calendar.”*<sup>36</sup>

In Egypt, Taha Husayn and Lutfi Sayyid were among those who suggested reviving the national heritage of ancient Egypt, and of awakening in the people a sense of their Pharaonic history.<sup>37</sup>

However, Muslims are supposed to follow the example of their Prophet and the teachings of the Qur'an, and to take pride in them as the means of achieving unity and saving humankind. In his Final Discourse, Imam Khomeini states:

We take pride and our noble and thoroughly committed nation is proud in being the followers of a school of thought which intend to dig out the Qur'anic truths - which commit themselves thoroughly to the unity of Muslims and even humanity- from the graveyards and utilize it as the greatest prescription for the disentanglement of man from all shackles on limbs and on his mind and souls which are leading him towards destruction, slavery and servitude to the oppressors.<sup>38</sup>

In Imam Khomeini's opinion, nationalism is one of the causes of the disasters and miseries faced by Muslims today. He writes in fact that those who try to revive nationalism are struggling against Islam.<sup>39</sup>

One of his statements in this regard is as follows: *“Nationalism is planned by plotters to create discord among Muslims and it is being propagandized by agents of colonialization.”*<sup>40</sup>

Imam Khomeini also states:

The plan of the great powers and their affiliates in the Muslim countries is to separate and divide the various strata of Muslims, whom God has declared brothers, under the guise of Kurd, Arab, Turk, Fars, etc. nations and even make them regard themselves as enemies of one another. This is against the path of Islam and the Qur'an.<sup>41</sup>

He furthermore remarks that: *“Those who, in the name of nationalism, factionalism, etc., create schism and disunity among Muslims, are armies of Devil, opponents of the holy Qur'an and helping agents of the superpowers.”*<sup>42</sup> Imam Khomeini clearly identified nationalism with reactionary forces and with colonial powers who encouraged nationalistic feelings among Muslims in order to foster disunity.<sup>43</sup>

3- National prejudice ('asabiyyah) in any of its forms, whether it be tribalism, racism, nationalism, or other manifestations such as bias against other nations and favouritism towards one's own, selfishness, fanaticism, vanity, exaggerating of national excellencies and finally feelings of being superior to others<sup>44</sup> are the touchstones of nationalism. Ibn Khaldun remarks that *“asabiyyah is one of the fundamental elements of nationalism.”*<sup>45</sup>

According to Islamic teachings, prejudice is strongly condemned. The Prophet said: *“Whosoever possesses in his heart 'asabiyyah ... even to the extent of a mustard seed, God will raise him on the Day of resurrection with the (pagan) Beduins of the jahiliyyah (the pre-Islamic era).”*<sup>46</sup> According to one definition,

... 'asabiyyah is an inner psychic quality which is manifested in patronizing and defending one's kindred and those with whom one has some kind of affinity or relation, whether it be religious creed or ideology, or whether it be soil or home. The affinity may also be similarity of profession or the relationship of teacher and pupil, or something else.<sup>47</sup>

'Asabiyyah may therefore be seen as a moral wickedness and a hateful characteristic generating moral and behavioural vices. Those who ascribe to this quality often claim that it *"take[s] the form of defence of truth or religion, but in reality it is not aimed to defend a just and truthful cause but for extending one's own influence or that of one's co-religionists and allies."*<sup>48</sup> When someone because of his selfish and tribal impulses defends the vices of his kinsmen or group, his attitude is an evident example of 'asabiyyah. In the words of Imam Khomeini:

He is a corrupt member of society, who corrupts it by confusing vice with virtue, and stands with the Beduins of the jahiliyyah, who were a group of nomadic Arabs who inhabited the desert before the advent of Islam, in an era of prevalence of darkness and ignorance.<sup>49</sup>

And Iqbal Lahuri says *"Nationalism is another face of barbarism."*<sup>50</sup>

Prior to the spread of Islam, the Arabs were a tribal society. They had a strong sense of 'asabiyyah towards their own groups. Islam challenged this prejudicial spirit and declared that the division of human beings into different tribes and races had only been willed by Allah in order to allow people to recognize one another more readily, not to give a sense of superiority to one tribe or nation over another. This is because in the sight of Allah, it is an individual's virtue and piety that functions as the key element of his superiority.<sup>51</sup>

According to a hadith the Prophet said: *"O you mankind! All of you are from Adam and Adam was created from earth (clay). There is no superiority of Arab over non-Arab except through the virtue of piety (God fearing)."*<sup>52</sup> It is also related that on the occasion of the battle of Uhud, a young Persian Muslim soldier, while attacking an infidel enemy, proudly said: *"Here is my sword, and I am a Persian."* The Prophet felt that such words would motivate nationalistic sentiments among the Muslims; thus he warned the man right away to take pride in his religion instead of his nationality.<sup>53</sup>

The Prophet, once addressing the Quraysh, said: *"O People of Quraysh! Verily one's honour and pride should be due to one's Islam ... (neither to his/her blood nor to his/her race)."* He insisted that Arabism was not a matter of narcissism; it was merely a language (like other languages) spoken by Arabs. In the Prophet's eyes, it was only by means of faith and good behaviour only that a man could achieve a higher position.<sup>54</sup>

These points demonstrate that nationalism is not concerned just with people's emotional feelings; it is an ideology as well. Islam never recommends such feelings and ideology to Muslims, though it does not oppose the positive feelings of nationalism that causes good results.

### **Positive aspects of nationalism**

The positive aspects of nationalism may be summarized as follows:

- A. It can lead to better integration among the members of a single nation.
- B. People of the same nationality may have a better understanding of one another and consequently better relations between themselves.
- C. When expressed in a positive way, nationalist sentiments can encourage the people of a nation to love their homeland and to serve each other and their country in ways that are noble.<sup>55</sup>

In these senses is nationalism in harmony with religion and intellect? Islam, in differentiating between the positive and negative products of nationalism, naturally favours the former, and thus encourages people to respect the virtue of their homeland (watan) and love it and their countrymen as well.

It also recognizes greater rights for neighbours, relatives and members of the same family. The negative results of nationalism are the result of separatist feelings which encourage people of different backgrounds to be hostile to one another and to deny rights to their fellow human beings.<sup>56</sup>

### **Nationalism as the Religion of Modern History**

In the eyes of many, nationalism is equivalent to a religion, with those who preach nationalist ideals acting as its prophets. Kohn remarks:

The age of nationalism saw for the first time the peoples, aroused to national consciousness, as the decisive actors of history. They found their spokesmen in national prophets who became the voice and the conscience of their people, interpreting its history or mission and shaping its character and personality ...<sup>57</sup>

Kohn goes on to say that this national prophet “*expressed the genius of his people or at least an important and representative aspect of it.*”<sup>58</sup> According to him, the “*free interplay of individual forces*” and the citizen’s “*complete union with his nation*” are respectively the two most distinctive manifestations of nineteenth century nationalism: the former representative of the English-speaking people and the latter the force behind the French Revolution.<sup>59</sup>

The nineteenth century Russian nationalist Dostoevsky, while accusing Western nationalism and liberalism of being morally dangerous because they “*set the individual free from his dependence upon God and the moral order and led to doubt and to immorality,*”<sup>60</sup> regarded “*religion as the true life-force.*” All evil, according to him are rooted in the lack of religion.<sup>61</sup>

However, like his fellow nationalists in the West, he spoke of Russian nationalism as the religion and thus “*was a prophet not of a universal God but of the Russian God in whom he saw 'the way, and the truth, and the life': no man and no people could come to salvation but by Him.*”<sup>62</sup>

Kohn, paraphrasing Dostoevsky’s message, states:

Each nation creates its God, Dostoevsky tells us, and yet one nation claims universality for its God, not for the universal God of Christianity, but for the tribe and its own creation. The exclusive fanaticism of a racial God is proclaimed here, as in most primitive antiquity, without any trace of the ethical sublimation into the God of universal justice demanded by the Hebrew prophets.<sup>63</sup>

Of those nationalist theoreticians who regard nationalism as a form of religion, Hayes offers the most moderate and practical arguments in favour of belief. He remarks that since the very dawn of life, human beings have lived with a tendency towards what he called a “*religious sense.*” This is a spiritual state which is reflected in human beings’ life by their “*faith in some god, some mysterious and controlling power outside*” themselves.<sup>64</sup>

This religious sense has survived throughout the history of humankind as a natural and normal sense.<sup>65</sup> Elaborating on this, Hayes goes into some detail in asserting the application of the religious sense to nationalism. He maintains that in modern Europe and the contemporary world “*under the impact of science, technology, and secular education*”, and, “*with the advent and spread of the Industrial Revolution,*” large numbers of people have tasted a kind of unnatural “*religious void.*” But, this void, according to Hayes, is regarded “*as urge arises to fill the void with some new faith.*” This phenomenon may be observed in the rise of various movements such as scientism, humanitarianism, positivism, emotional nationalism, etc.<sup>66</sup>

In his *A History of Nationalism in the East*, Kohn states:

From the eighteenth century onwards nationalism supplanted religion as the governing principle in Europe. ... Everywhere the language of religion was replaced by the vernacular<sup>67</sup>, which was moulded and stimulated in its development almost everywhere by the translation of the Holy Scriptures into the national language. ... Religion ceased to be the unquestioned basis and source of public law; its place was taken by national sovereignty.<sup>68</sup>

In analyzing the progress of nationalism in the East, Kohn states that it is comparable to that which religion had achieved in the past. He believes that all the systems in the East that had survived for centuries “*were violently shaken by the penetration of the national idea from Europe*” and consequently nationalism took religion's place “*as the principle governing all social and intellectual life.*”<sup>69</sup> Kohn's remarks indicate how nationalism, from its early development, was similar to religion to the extent that it was able to take the place of the latter and function as a kind of modern religion by itself.

Again, according to the views of some Muslim thinkers, nationalism in one sense can be simply seen as equivalent to nationality-worship (in Persian, milliyat-parasti)<sup>70</sup>. Sometimes it is believed that nationalism is similar to religion (shibh-i din) in having its own god, prophet, constitution and laws<sup>71</sup>. It seems obvious that nationalism in this sense represents a new religion. It is also considered as a great obstacle to Muslim unification<sup>72</sup>. These are some of the elements that may be found within nationalism and in the writings and views of the above-mentioned nationalist thinkers.

Nationalism in this sense can never be reconciled to Islam, for they are both essentially and effectively different. Based on the monotheistic teachings of Islam, God's prophets were sent in order to, among other tasks, call humankind to acknowledge the Oneness of God, to bring human beings' life into order and safeguard the rights of the people -regardless of their nationality- “*to keep a balance between their rights and their duties*” and then to establish social justice.<sup>73</sup>

Comparing the effects of nationalism and the teachings of Islam, one can see how far the movement of nationalism is from Islamic thought. The Muslim thinker and poet Iqbal, a man fully aware of the consequences of modern nationalism, says:

In our modern age, we have nothing to do with idols such as Hubal, al-Lat, and al-'Uzza, the gods of the age of pre-Islamic ignorance. However, it is a modern idol and idol-worship known as nationalism that is the most dangerous goddess of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They (colonial powers) intend to destroy the religion of the Prophet. Be aware! O brothers and sisters of Islam, there is no border to limit us except Islam. Our hearts are not restricted by territorial borders. We are from Islam and live in the country of Islam.<sup>74</sup>

Another famous Muslim scholar, Mutahhari goes even further, saying that nationalist thought and pride have no role to play in the sciences, philosophy or divine religion. No scientific doctrine, nor a philosophical theory or religious truth ever belonged to a specific nation or a specific nationalism. Indeed, the scholars and thinkers responsible for discovering scientific, philosophical or religious fact or truths, belong to humankind in general. Science, philosophy and heavenly religion reside in no particular nation; rather, they are universal and belong to humanity. The same can be said of

the theoreticians of science, religion and philosophy. The entire world is their homeland and the people of all nations are their countrymen.<sup>75</sup>

Therefore, it is humanity that would take pride in them and their invaluable theories. Philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, etc. were born and educated in ancient Greece, but their schools of thought were welcomed by Muslim thinkers many centuries later. Jesus was born in the Middle East, but nowadays it is the West which is considered to be the headquarters of Christianity. Makkah was the cradle of the Prophet Muhammad and the birthplace of Islam, but it was Madinah that welcomed Islam first. And today the Muslim world is not restricted to only the Arabic-speaking countries; rather, it has expanded to many areas of the world.<sup>76</sup>

### **An Overview of Contemporary Muslim History**

Pan-Arabism, Pan-Iranism and Pan-Turanism, three of the different tendencies or ideologies among Muslim societies, came into being as a result of secularist activities at the beginning of the twentieth century and during the inter-war period (1914-1945)<sup>77</sup>. However, my present discussion will not focus on the problems of particular Muslim nations or Arab, Turkish or Persian nationalism.

My major concern here is the theoretical stance of Islam on the subject of nationalism. In some ways, it is almost confusing to speak of Islam and nationalism by referring to specific examples. P. J. Vatikiotis in his chapter on Islam and Nationalism, faces this problem in dealing with individual nationalist ideologies.<sup>78</sup>

The work conducted by Vatikiotis is to a large extent a study of a specific Muslim nation and its nationalism rather than of Islam and nationalism, for the terms Arab, Persian, Turk, etc., are not equivalent to Islam.

At any rate, Syria was the country in which Arab nationalism, (al-qawmiyyah al-'Arabiyyah) had its origin.<sup>79</sup> However, according to M. J. Steiner, “*Syria was not the first Arab land to open her gates to modern nationalist; Egypt did so several decades earlier. But Syria was the first Arab speaking country to ride towards nationalism on the vehicle of cultural awakening.*”<sup>80</sup> It was before World War I that Arab nationalism emerged, and it was in the period after World War II that it spread through the Arab world. Sharabi has stated:

The most sophisticated articulation of the doctrine of Arab nationalism is probably that given by the Socialist Arab Ba'th party. But Arab nationalism does not constitute a single political creed ... Under the leadership of Gamal 'Abdul-Nasser, a mass nationalist movement emerged which attracted the allegiance of Arabs from Morocco to Iraq.<sup>81</sup>

'Urubah (Arabism) may be defined as taking pride in being the inheritor of the Arab as well as Muslim culture heritage.<sup>82</sup> Syria at that time was considered to be a cosmopolitan country of many races, nationalities and religions. Therefore, it is rather surprising to find it stated by Sharabi that Syria “*was destined to become the cradle of Arab nationalism.*” There existed around twenty religious sects in that relatively small area each with its own voice. From within such an area “*the cultural renaissance of the Arabs in modern times*” emerged.<sup>83</sup>

As a result of this movement, however, the religious outlook was replaced by a secular doctrine whose power had been derived from both the cultural and political aspirations of the peoples who were fighting for their independence. This wave of secularism derived from the West, was to a large extent more successful in Turkey than in the Arab lands “*where Islam still retains some power as a cultural and even political factor.*” In the case of the latter, “*the bonds of religion had to be removed slowly and gradually.*”<sup>84</sup>

The Pan-Islamic movement of the end of the nineteenth century on the other hand, represented “*an impulse to resist and repulse the attacks of the European powers.*” It was obviously intended to unite all Muslims “*in a common defensive struggle against European attacks.*”<sup>85</sup> 'Divide and rule' had been the policy of the colonial powers up to that time.

Since the rise of nationalist movements within their societies, Muslims have been constantly encouraged to think about and to take pride in their nationality. In some instances, and mostly in Western societies nationalism is considered to be a key factor in a nation's success and independence. In Europe the expansion of the movement was natural since there was no energetic and effective school of religious thought encouraging people of the same religion and different nations to come together and form a single community. In Muslim world, however, Islam itself is considered to be the guarantor of liberty, and is regarded as the basic element of Muslim independence and freedom. Algeria, Indonesia, Pakistan, and more recently Islamic Republic of Iran are examples of this trend.<sup>86</sup>

In the nineteenth century the Muslim world was stirred by the teachings of two insightful figures, Sayyid Jamal al-Din (1838- 1896/97) and Shaykh Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905), the “two champions of the Pan-Islamic movement.” These two Muslim thinkers, and particularly Sayyid Jamal al-Din were among the first figures who “inspired feelings of resistance to the danger of Western imperialism in the hearts of the Muslim peoples” and forced them to think of an Islamic front against imperialism.<sup>87</sup>

Sayyid himself used to hide his own nationality for he preferred not to be known as an individual belonging to a specific nation so that the Western colonialists might motivate others against him<sup>88</sup>. He stated that there is no nationality for Muslims except Islam<sup>89</sup>.

Sayyid was chief among individuals who “were the first to seize upon the Pan-Islamic idea, and became its propagandists.”<sup>90</sup> Familiar with the ancient civilization and power of the East, he “yearned to rouse it from a state of complete decadence. He recognized all the menace of existing conditions and the need of a solid alliance against Christian Europe.”<sup>91</sup>

Sayyid Jamal al-Din “conceived the idea of Pan-Islam”, in 1882 while in Constantinople, where he made a “deep impression upon” Ottoman Sultan Abdul- Hamid II. The Turkish Sultan developed and supported the idea of Pan-Islam “as a deliberate policy and attempt to restore to the office of Caliph its ancient significance as the chief and protector of all Muhammedans.”<sup>92</sup>

The Sultan sent delegates to the Muslim world “to rally all believers behind their caliph.” Consequently, even among the orthodox Arabs, Shi'ites, and Sunnites, the Pan-Islamic idea received an encouraging response, although theoretically they could not recognize Abdul-Hamid as caliph<sup>93</sup>, probably because they realized that the Qur'an did not predict the office of Caliph. Instead they believed that such an office “sprang from military and political needs.<sup>94</sup>” During the revival of Pan-Islamism, the office of caliphate, after having long been void of all significance, “rose again to importance, especially through Abdul-Hamid who endeavoured to restore the authority of the Caliph.”<sup>95</sup>

It was in the late nineteenth century that both Sayyid Jama al-Din and Sultan Abdul-Hamid upheld the call for Muslim unity and for a single Islamic government ruling the entire Muslim world. They tried to gather all Muslims under the umbrella of the Ottoman Empire in the hope of defending Islam against Western imperialism and its dream of conquering the Middle East.<sup>96</sup>

However, as Kohn elaborates:

In spite of a consciousness of Islamic affinity, politically nationalism was the stronger force. Attempts to revive the Caliphate (which Mustafa Kemal abolished in Turkey in 1924) as a pan-Islamic movement ... failed.<sup>97</sup>

At the very outset of the movement of Pan-Islam, the Western colonial powers, mainly France and England, realized the danger of this newborn doctrine. They tried as a result to defeat this movement before it grew and acquired strength. They began to explore every means of destroying Muslim unity. One of the most effective methods utilized in this regard was to encourage nationalist feelings among Arabs and Turks in order to create barriers between the various peoples of the Muslim world. This strategy was aimed in particular at the Ottoman Empire. Thus, it was no accident that the first nationalist aspirations arose in the dependencies of the latter.<sup>98</sup>

Three motivations have been recognized as lying behind this policy. First, the British colonial office actually perceived a threat in the wave of Islamic unity and so tried to discourage its emergence. Secondly, the creation of a Jewish state was in the planning stages. Thirdly, the presence of Russia in the Muslim world was endangering the political aims of the office. Steiner remarks:

To the policy makers of the British Colonial Office, Pan-Arabia is occasionally an expression of what is known as 'benevolent imperialism,' and sometimes - oddly enough- a bugbear aimed at intimating the Jewish National Home in Palestine.<sup>99</sup>

He continues that it was the intention of the British “*to build up Pan-Arabia as a bulwark against Russian penetration into the Arab World.*”<sup>100</sup> Since Pan-Arabism lacked the necessary elements required to unify the Arabs of different areas, it did not go beyond the status of a myth in the Arab history. “*The three prerequisites of any political movement are: ideology, organization, and leadership. In Pan-Arabism all three are lacking.*”<sup>101</sup>

Alongside the Pan-Arabism movement, two other movements were being formed in other parts of Muslim world. The role of German Orientalists in planting the idea of Pan-Turanism in the minds of the Turks is discussed by Steiner as well. Again, it was done to inspire “*the Pan-Turan leaders of Turkey to side with Germany against Russia and Great Britain.*”<sup>102</sup>

It is asserted that three Jewish from Europe motivated the thought of Turk Nationalism. This is confirmed by the famous Orientalist Bernard Lewis in his *Islam in History*. According to him, Arthur Lumley David (1832-1811) was the first one who encouraged the feeling of nationalism among the Turks. He was a British Jewish who departed to Turkey and distributed a book known as *Preliminary Discourses* trying to confirm the excellence and superiority of Turk race to Arab and other nations.<sup>103</sup>

At that time, Iran was not governed by the Ottoman Empire; therefore, the movement of pan-Iranism has its own story. In fact, the pan-Iranism movement, propagated as it was by Western- leaning free-thinkers, was not as advanced as the nationalist movements in other Muslim areas. This was because the British Colonial Office now realized that the wave of Muslim unity influenced Iranians less than Turks and Arabs, due to Iran's independence from the Ottoman Empire.

The colonial powers were not very concerned that Iran might become a part of a united Islamic world. They therefore concentrated on introducing Western institutions into Iran without feeling obliged to strengthen the nationalist sentiment for Pan-Iranism. It was for this reason that the nationalist movement of Pan-Iranism was weaker than Pan-Turanism or Pan-Arabism in other parts of the world of Islam.<sup>104</sup> Here again, and in Pan-Turanism as well the above-mentioned three prerequisites were lacking.

In any case, the establishment of nationalist movements in Muslim world was not the result of a real consciousness or awareness among Muslims. Rather it was the fruit of Western colonialism. Kohn claims that the rise of nationalism in countries outside Western Europe during this period was influenced by the West. *“Yet this very dependence on the West hurt the pride of the native educated class, as soon as it began to develop its own nationalism.”*<sup>105</sup>

**To be continued.**

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**Islam and Nationalism: A Theoretical Point of View  
Part 2**

**Authors(s): S. Ahmad Rahnamaei**

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### **Nationalism and Islam: Clash or Reconciliation?**

The phenomenon of ‘nationalism in religion’ according to S. W. Baron is considered to be an obstacle that prevents religion from fulfilling its role in human life. The necessary balance between organized humanity’s social responsibility and the right of each state would be gained through organized religion.

In *Modern Nationalism and Religion*, Baron attempts to show a way to achieve this aim. For the sake of this aspiration, he makes the proposal that “*religion must try to purge itself of its nationalist biases.*” In this regard, he believes that “*the impact of religious bodies can make itself felt most strongly and effectively.*”<sup>1</sup> He further adds:

The world religions have long represented large-scale approaches to the riddles of existence. While stressing individual beliefs and observations and, at times, overemphasizing parochial duties and attitudes, they also have taught man to think in terms of a universal godhead, the cosmic relevance of even minutiae of ethical behaviour and the essential nature of an all-human brotherhood.<sup>2</sup>

The religions that Baron is speaking of here are the most dominant surviving religions in the West, i.e., Christianity and Judaism. Referring to the position of the Judeo-Christian heritage, Baron remarks that it “*has been endangered by the rise of the neopagan forms of extreme nationalism and the idolization of race and state ...*”<sup>3</sup>

The negative impact of nationalism on the living religions of modern Western societies seems obvious. It should be emphasized, however, that the nationalist biases within a divine religion have never had their origin in the religion itself; rather, it is the adherents and followers who burden themselves with such prejudices. This will be made clearer when I later consider the Qur’anic teachings in this area and the philosophy of prophethood.

To fulfil the objectives of the present study, I should restrict myself to a description of nationalism in the mirror of Islam only. From a theoretical point of view, I can see that there are not many similarities between Islam as a divine religion which has its own especial doctrine of human life, and nationalism as, let us say, a political movement in terms of its fundamental elements.

A distinction between the attitude of Islam and the practice of its adherents has been suggested by Soekarno. He, criticizing nationalists’ and Marxists’ comment on Islam, remarks that:

Nationalists and Marxists both blame Islam for the down-fall of the Moslem nations, their present backwardness and the fact that most of them are under Western domination.

But they are confused! It is not Islam, but rather its adherents who have been at fault. Seen from a nationalist and socialist perspective, it would be hard to find a civilization comparable in greatness to that of the early Islamic world. The downfall of national greatness, the downfall of Islamic socialism was not brought about by Islam itself, but by the moral downfall of its leaders. ... Once the “*Caliphs became kings,*” the true nature of Islam was suppressed.<sup>4</sup>

Soekarno also says: *"I am certainly not saying that Islam accepts Materialism; nor do I forget that Islam transcends national boundaries and is supra-national in character."*<sup>5</sup>

Once the Muslim Ummah was established in Madina in 632 A.D., the leader of Islam proclaimed the message of Islam on a universal scale. In his Political Theory of Islam, Abul 'Ala Mawdoodi remarks: *"A state of this sort evidently cannot restrict the scope of its activities. It is a universal and all-inclusive state."*

*Its sphere of activity is co-extensive with the whole of human life"*<sup>6</sup> Islam, from the very beginning, has been a monotheistic religion of *"supra-national and universal human scope."* Islam, rejecting racism and nationalism, *"did not stop at the call to the faith. It rose to establish a state which embodied a new nation, which is that of the believers, Islamic Ummah or Ummah Muslima."*<sup>7</sup> P. J. Vatikiotis, in paraphrasing this point, states:

The very basis of this new nation and its nationalism, if you wish, has been the religion of Islam. The state has been and remains its instrument. The state, therefore, has no value in itself; nor is it set up temporally for a particular people, as a nation-state, to the exclusion of others. Rather, it is based on the universal principle of Islam to safeguard the religion and extend its message.<sup>8</sup>

The Muslim Ummah is built on the basis of the Qur'anic faith and certain self-evident truths such as the equality of all people before God, friendly relationships among fellow believers, and kindness towards people. Here are some words from Imam 'Ali b. Musa al-Rida (765-818) where he says:

To be friendly with others denotes one half of wisdom.

The believer who is endowed with a good temper will have the strongest faith.

Perfection in intellect is primarily to have faith in God and secondly to behave well towards others.

To bear enmity towards people is the worst provision for the journey to the Hereafter.<sup>9</sup>

The members of the Muslim Community, recognizing that humankind is endowed by the Compassionate Creator with certain inalienable rights, like the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, are encouraged to do good, to help the persecuted and to fulfil the desires of the needy.<sup>10</sup> As Majid Khadduri mentions:

In the Tradition, Muhammad is reported to have conceived of the Muslim community as *"a single hand, like a compact wall whose bricks support each other,"* and in the Qur'an it is often referred to as a distinct *"nation"* (ummah) or a *"brotherhood,"* bound by common obligations to a superior divine authority.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, one finds neither inspiration nor encouragement towards nationalism within the constitution of the Muslim ummah.

Regarding the attitude of Islam towards nationalism, there has been a very long discussion among the theoreticians of the political and social sciences. Those who express negative feelings towards nationalism are themselves divided.

Some believe that nationalism is in conflict with Islam, but at the same time, they maintain, as a kind of justification, the existence of temporal

secularism within the power structure of the Islamic nation. One such theoretician is Vatikiotis, whose attitude is clarified in the following passage.

Nationalism (qawmiyya)<sup>12</sup> as an ideology is incompatible with the world of Islam, for it implies a pre-Islamic kind of tribal particularism, or jahiliyya. In fact, nationalism is Islam's deadliest, for it represents an attempt to separate Islam from polity and isolate it from the resolution of temporal matters.

That is, it postulates the separation between religion and polity, religion and the state, or it denies Islam its central role in the regulation of Muslim earthly political affairs. The nation state in Islam is then an ideological, not a territorial concept. It comprises the community of the faithful or believers wherever they may be.<sup>13</sup>

Vatikiotis explains that the nation state of Islam implies "*the structure of temporal-secular power.*"<sup>14</sup> The author justifies this kind of "*temporal-secular power*" as a means of safeguarding the ummah "*against its external, infidel enemies and ensures that the believers can lead the life of observant Muslims.*"<sup>15</sup>

This is in spite of the fact that the Qur'anic nation state of Islam by itself has nothing to do with secularism, even in its temporal form. Islam is a religion, and between it and secularism there can be found no harmony. From the genuine Islamic point of view, the believers are even taught not to accept an unbeliever ruler who governs not by the revealed Shari'ah of Islam.<sup>16</sup>

As Kohn mentions:

From the very first Islam was not only a religion, but a political and social system as well. The Koran, the Sunna, and the systems based upon them, contain not only religious commandments but also the principles of private and public law.<sup>17</sup>

### A glance at the Qur'anic passages

There are two Qur'anic terms that imply more or less the notion of a nation. One of these is *milla*, which is mentioned seventeen times in fifteen verses. In defining the concept of *milla*, Raghib Isfahani, in his dictionary of Qur'anic words and expressions, states that *milla*, *imlal* and *imla'* are all of the same root.

The infinitive *imla'* meaning 'to dictate', contains the notion of something which is dictated from any divine or undivine, mighty or unmighty, holy or non-holy source. The word *milla* in its religious sense means a way, a path, or a cult which is dictated and presented by a divine<sup>18</sup> or perhaps undivine leader or group. Both cases have been exemplified in the Qur'an:

*"Say, verily, my Lord has guided me to the straight way, a right and steadfast religion, the milla (religion-trod) of Ibrahim, the true in faith, and Ibrahim certainly joined not gods with Allah."*<sup>19</sup>

This verse hints at Ibrahim's *milla* as a divine path and religion. On the other hand, we recite in the Qur'an:

*"And the unbelievers said to their apostles, 'Be sure we shall derive you out of our land, or you shall return to our milla (religion).'"*<sup>20</sup>

Since a divine religion like that of Ibrahim was revealed and dictated by Allah, it is called *milla* in the sense that it is a dictated path that should be followed by the adherents of that divine religion. Thus, *milla* in its most elementary concept is employed to mean path, rite or religion itself, as it may be applicable to people who follow that rite or religion.

In either case, *milla* in its divine sense is also attributed to the prophet or to the leader of a religion.<sup>21</sup> According to the Qur'an, people are requested to recognize and practice the divine religion of the prophet Ibrahim:

*"Say, Allah speaks the truth, thus, follow the religion of Ibrahim (millata Ibrahim), the sane in faith; he was not of the pagans."*<sup>22</sup>

The *milla* of infidels, by contrast, is a satanic cult which is considered to contradict the divine paths of God's prophets.

Islam is an Abrahamic religion, and Muslims are to honour the *milla* of their father Ibrahim<sup>23</sup> by following the Prophet Muhammad. Muslims then form an Abrahamic *milla* with especial qualifications, all of whose elements are based on divinity without taking any racial, territorial, linguistic, or other differences into consideration.

This is because, as we understand from the Qur'anic verses, there is an eternal togetherness between the nation of Islam and Islam itself. Hess Andrew C. mentions that the word *millet* [*milla*] though basically employed to mean "*religion*", later in Islamic history is extended to include "*religious community*", i.e., the community of Islam.<sup>24</sup>

The word '*ummah*' is another Qur'anic term, referring to the religious nation of Islam. This word occurs more than forty times in the Qur'an as well as a number of other times in two other conjugations, i.e., *ummatukum* (your *ummah*) and *umam* (different *ummahs*).

The passages that contain the word *ummah* are so varied that its meaning cannot be rigidly defined." But is the term in its Qur'anic concept identified with what R. Paret deems as always referring to "*ethical, linguistic or*

*religious bodies of people who are the objects of the divine plan of salvation”?*<sup>25</sup>

We may take this definition of ummah as applicable in the case of some other ethical religious nations in reality; nevertheless, it seems a problematic concept when we are concerned with the notion of a Muslim community referring to the Qur’anic passages that contain the term ummah.

Accordingly, there is no supposition of elements like language or ethnicity as playing a role in the formation of the Islamic ummah. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri says:

In an Islamic state, Islam cannot be treated as a personal affair of an individual or a belief or faith of a particular group. ... It negates the idea of duality of religious and secular life as it practically exists in present-day Christianity in the form of incompatibility between church and state.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, an Islamic state and secular life contradict one another. In a secular state, religion has no obligatory role in providing the authority; rather, it is the people themselves who are the source of its authority. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri says:

*“But the authority of an Islamic state derives from the Almighty Allah ... and Islam is the basis in polity in an Islamic state; it regulates both individual and state affairs.”*<sup>27</sup>

## The usage of “ummah” in the Qur’an and the concept of an Islamic ummah

To some extent, the usage of the term ummah in the Qur’an does not answer our understanding of the concept. On a few occasions, the exegetes of the Qur’an qualify the term as referring exclusively to the Islamic community. Allamah Tabataba’i<sup>28</sup> describes the literal concept and other usages of the word ummah in the Qur’an by offering four definitions:

1- It may be literally translated as ‘people’, meaning a group of people, as in the verse:

*“Mankind was but one single ummah (people, nation) ...”*<sup>29</sup>

2- Sometimes the word is meant to describe a single human being, as in the verse:

*“Surely Ibrahim was an ummah devoutly obedient to Allah.”*<sup>30</sup>

3- ‘A long period of time’ is another usage of the word, as is implied in the verse:

*“And remembered after an ummah”,*<sup>31</sup>

meaning after a long time.

4- ‘Religion’ is considered to be a fourth usage of the term, such as in the verse:

*“And surely this is your single ummah and I am your Lord, therefore, fear Me,”*<sup>32</sup>

or in the verse:

*“Surely this your ummah is one ummah and I am your Lord, therefore, worship Me.”*<sup>33</sup>

Allamah maintains that *“In both these verses, according to some commentators, the word ummah ... has been used for ‘religion’.”*<sup>34</sup>

Allamah regards the first usage of the above-mentioned ones as the original meaning and remarks that the other kinds of usage are based on this fundamental one.<sup>35</sup> In the case of the fourth concept, he prefers to explain the word ummah in the sense of a ‘people.’ Accordingly, it represents the notion of one single Muslim nation that believes in Allah, worships Him and is faithful to Him.

Once again in dealing with the notion of the Prophet’s ummah, Allamah interprets the word ummah in the two latter verses to mean nothing more or less than a group of people. He furthermore states that the reference to Muhammad’s ummah, in the sense that it includes all those who have believed in his call, gained currency after the revelation of the Qur’an and the expansion of Islam.<sup>36</sup>

In his commentary on the verse:

*“Verily this is your ummah, the unique ummah, and I am your Lord, then worship Me,”*<sup>37</sup>

Allamah mentions that the word ummah hints at a group which gathers around the same objective. Such a translation is understood from the first root of the word ummah, which is amma, i.e. *“had an aim.”*

Therefore, ummah is a company of people *“which has a single aim, a single goal and a single ambition, and that unity of aim unites all the members, and makes them one people. That is why it is correct to use it for one human being as well as for many ...”*<sup>38</sup> On another occasion, Allamah

maintains that the unification of the ummah springs from its unique shari‘a, that is, the Shari‘a of Oneness (Din al-Tawhid).<sup>39</sup>

### **The constitution of the first Islamic community**

The formation of the Islamic community dates from the time of the Prophet in Madina. He created a new community there shortly after arriving in this first city-state of Islam.<sup>40</sup> Ibn Ishaq in his *Sirat Rasul Allah* relates the following passage<sup>41</sup> which is translated by A. Guillaume:

The apostle wrote a document concerning the emigrants and the helpers in which he made a friendly agreement with the Jews and established them in their religion and their property, and stated the reciprocal obligations, as follows: This is a document from Muhammad the prophet [governing the relations] between the believers and Muslims of Quraysh and Yathrib, and those who followed them and joined them and laboured with them. They are one community (ummah) to the exclusion of all men.<sup>42</sup>

The broad outlines of an Islamic state were established within this first constitution of the city-state of Madina. Through this constitution, the Prophet declared Madina to be a political unit. As depicted in article 2 of the constitution, Muslims established a “*unique communication*” (ummah wahida) as “*distinct from all the people of the world.*”<sup>43</sup>

The Prophet “*went beyond the circle of Muslims proper and included those citizens of Madina who had not yet heeded his religious appeal in one political combination.*”<sup>44</sup> Within the framework of the constitution it is expressly stated that all citizens, including the Jews and other non-Muslim minorities, lived under the protection of the Islamic state.

At any rate, this single ummah constituted by the Prophet was a Muslim ummah under whose political aegis many non-Muslim minorities had been given protection.<sup>45</sup> In short, as Khadduri states: “*The conception of the ummah or brotherhood constituted the basis of the Islamic community in whose membership alone the believer obtains prosperity in this world and salvation in the next.*”<sup>46</sup>

The Qur’an, appreciating the wise act of the Prophet, says:

“*It is the milla (cult, nation) of your father Ibrahim. It is He (God) Who has named you Muslims, both before and in this revelation.*”<sup>47</sup>

Furthermore, the Prophet, in order to reinforce the position of the newly born ummah, “*instituted brotherhood between his fellow emigrants and the helpers, and he said, ... ‘Let each of you take a brother in God.’*”

One of the aspects of the Prophet’s conduct (sirah) that discourages nationalism and focuses on faith as the key-element of Muslim unity is this brotherhood between people of several nations and tribes. One may go further and say that even the wars that occurred between the Qurayshi Prophet and the infidel tribesmen of the Quraysh were intended to discourage tribalism as well as nationalism.

The Prophet and Muslims, as depicted in the Qur’an,<sup>48</sup> were allowed to defend themselves and fight against the Quraysh since he and his followers had been unjustly treated by the Quraysh simply because of their faith in Allah.<sup>49</sup>

In this case, the nationalist and tribalist interests were disregarded for the sake of the monotheistic faith of Muslims in contrast to the idol-worship of the Quraysh. This means that the faith of the ummah at that time overshadowed all other elements and aspects of life.



### **The role of religion in the formation of the “ummah wāhida”**

Ever since Islam was first revealed, Muslims have been encouraged to live together and to work towards establishing a single Muslim nation embracing all Muslims around the world. The Qur’an, in explaining the role of the prophets, goes beyond the concept of one Muslim nation and explains how humankind used to be one community, but because of internal disputes became divided:

(All) people were a single nation, so Allah raised prophets as bearers of good tidings and as warners; and with them He revealed book with the truth, so that it might judge between people in that in which they differed and struggled; and none but the very people who were given the book, after clear signs (and arguments) had come to them, differed about it, due to their selfish contumacy.<sup>50</sup>

This verse is addressed to all people belonging to the human race.<sup>51</sup> Allamah Tabataba’i states:

This verse refers to the beginning of humanity when they were united, lived a simple life and had simple thoughts. There were no differences or any tug-of-war in matters of life or livelihood, nor were there any disagreements about religion or religious matters.<sup>52</sup>

During the early period of human history, there were no considerable struggles over matters affecting both everyday life and religious beliefs. Year after year, and generation after generation, human beings have been continuously climbing *“the heights of knowledge and thought and ever progressing along the path of learning and culture.”*<sup>53</sup>

Day by day new ways to improve human civilization are found, and newer instruments invented *“to make life more and more comfortable.”*<sup>54</sup> People in primitive times did not become entangled in any serious disagreements; *“nor there occurred among them any lasting differences.”*<sup>55</sup>

However, since human beings possess *“the natural urge to take advantage of others”* and have a natural need to cooperate with others, they cannot avoid quarrelling with one another. Since some individuals were stronger in body and mind than others, they used to take more from the weaker *“than they gave them in return.”*

Thus, human mind was occupied by two different motivations with two opposite consequences. On the one hand *“whenever he used a newly-acquired expertise, it opened new avenues of progress and dexterity for him.”* On the other, he was in need of cooperation with others.<sup>56</sup> Allamah Tabataba’i states:

It may seem strange that the same natural urge compelled men to remain together, on one hand, and led them to quarrel and find differences on the other. But ... there is a third faculty above them to judge and decide, and to create a balance between them.<sup>57</sup>

I have paraphrased at length Allamah Tabataba’i’s interpretation of the verse 2: 213 to show that according to his interpretation, God’s prophets, whose major responsibility was to call people to the religion of Oneness and to establish a monotheistic religious nation, were the great architects of the ummah wāhida.

For the sake of unity, people of all nations and races are asked to follow the path set down by those guides who themselves have been guided by Allah. Muslims, regardless of national, racial, tribal, and ethnic differences, are expected to follow the Prophet Muhammad as the Seal and as the Last of the prophets.

They are called to embrace Islam with their whole existence and to worship one God, follow one prophet, acknowledge one book, one shari'ah and one direction, so that they might form one single community, even though they may be from different nationalities or territories.

The same Qur'anic verse encourages people to form a single community and avoid any conflict among them. However because of moral, behavioural and practical problems such as selfishness, greed, ungratefulness, injustice, etc., human beings have always contended with one another, except for those who sincerely believe.

Accordingly, the best way to establish a real single community is to follow the teachings of Allah's prophets and to adhere to the divine religion revealed to them. Since the messages of all the prophets fundamentally are the same, as they all call attention to the Oneness of God and belief in the Hereafter, their sincere followers, by respecting these principles, may get along together more comfortably than unbelievers.

The uniqueness of the divine religion is manifested in the following verse: "*Verily, the only religion before Allah is Islam*",<sup>58</sup>

illustrating that all messengers had basically the same path and religion.

Allamah Tabataba'i states concerning the interpretation of the Qur'anic passage: "*the verse explains why religion was promulgated and mankind obliged to follow it, and why differences occurred in it.*"<sup>59</sup>

Going into more detail, Allamah explains that religion plays an important role in the formation of a single ummah. The creation of a single ummah is a goal which is in harmony with the nature of humankind. He maintains that "*mankind having been created with a natural urge to remain together and cooperate with each other, were in the beginning one single group.*"

Disputes however occurred that caused them to lose their togetherness. As a result of differences and disputes, people were divided into different groups and sects. These differences occurred either because of "*the acquisition of the necessities of life*" or "*because of the revolt of the very people who were given the book, after the fundamentals and characteristics of religion had been fully explained to them and the proof of Allah had been completed for them.*"<sup>60</sup>

No factor other than divine religion, such as nationality, language, race, blood, territory, etc. can bring people under a single umbrella; rather, they by themselves may introduce differences of opinion. In this regard, what the verse is implying is that there are two sorts of differences: "*first, the differences based on worldly gains, which was but natural; second, the differences regarding religious matters which were based not on nature, but on the revolt of mischief-makers.*"<sup>61</sup> To remove both kinds of differences, Allah created divine laws based on true faith, fine character and good actions.<sup>62</sup>

Based on this interpretation, Allamah remarks that the problem of human differences can be solved only by means of divine religion, whose perfect role

within human society can help in the formation of one single ummah and the establishment of social justice. He states:

The divine religion is the only means of happiness and felicity for the human species, and it keeps life in order. It creates a balance between various human instincts and urges, and keeps them on the middle path, preventing them from going towards either extreme. Thus, there appears the best system and the highest discipline in the human life both of this world and of the Hereafter, the material as well as the spiritual.<sup>63</sup>

Here, “*an outline of the social and religious history of human beings*” is given in the verse.<sup>64</sup>

Due to the premise that human beings are social by nature, there is a natural instinct to take advantage of others just as others may benefit from him.

This ‘give-and-take’ promoted men to live in society and to cooperate with each other in their affairs. It necessitated the safeguarding of the rights of every member of that society to keep a balance between their rights and their duties. This is called social justice.<sup>65</sup>

Throughout history, social justice has been the chief goal of human beings. However, this same history shows that because of the negative aspects of character, human beings always engaged themselves and their fellows in personal and social problems. Consequently, they let difficulties and disasters develop and remain unsolved. Some of the characteristics of human beings are mentioned in the Qur’an as follows:

“*Surely man is unjust, ignorant*”<sup>66</sup>;

“*Surely insan is created avaricious*”<sup>67</sup>;

“*Surely insan is unjust, very ungrateful*”<sup>68</sup>;

“*Nay! Verily insan is wont to rebel as he sees him/herself free from want.*”<sup>69</sup>

With respect to such comments, Allamah remarks:

This is why whenever a man acquires power over his fellows, the dictates of social justice are forgotten; and the mighty one ignores the rights of weaker ones. It is as much true in the case of individuals as in that of nations and states; and this has been going on from the early history of mankind until the present, which is called the age of civilization and freedom!<sup>70</sup>

This is a common problem for human nations including Muslim societies all around the world. It is clear that ever since it emerged within the Muslim world, nationalism, inasmuch as it is mostly a political movement, has not been yet able to overcome such problems. From a historical point of view, the wave of nationalism among Muslim societies dates to the late nineteenth century.

The phenomenon of national consciousness emerged first in Europe and then manifested in other continents including Muslim countries. Due to some political reasons, the first inspiration of nationalism showed itself in the territories of Ottoman Empire.<sup>71</sup>

Nationalism, though it may answer some of the needs of a nation or eliminate certain of its problems, can never remove them all; in fact it is likely to cause further problems. Thus, there has always been a vital need for a strong and authentic instrument by means of which human beings may do

away with their personal and social problems and bring social justice into practice.

Allamah, writing of the differences and disputes that have resulted in people failing to remain as a single community, insists that divine laws, based “*on the belief of the oneness of Allah, on true faith, on fine character and good deeds*” provide the only solution.<sup>72</sup>

Within the framework of the constitution of Islamic society, the aforementioned points are significant. Islamic society is something of a phenomenon in our present time, potentially maintaining as it does a certain unity in spite of the fact that it is composed of several nationalities, and these widely separated geographically.

Today, Muslims all over the world are members of this society, sharing many common ideas, feelings and causes. Establishing brotherhood,<sup>73</sup> the Qur’an encourages believers to have as well as to show a powerful sympathy and integration between them. In fact, it has only been because of military or political matters, or perhaps due to colonial interference, that Muslims, albeit unwillingly, have separated from each other.

As was mentioned before, in recent centuries, the Western powers have been one of the main causes of this separation. However, nothing has been able to destroy the basis of the unity which is rooted in the faith and implemented in the hearts of Muslims. As Iqbal, the great poet, says, “*the truth is single one; though our tents (homes) are not connected to each other, our hearts are alike and united.*”<sup>74</sup>

The annual pilgrimage (hajj) to Mecca during the month of Dhi’l-Hijjah is a remarkable gathering of Muslims of every nationality, and an indication of the importance that they attach to the principles in which they believe in common. The cooperation manifested in the hajj may be regarded as nothing less than a model for a potential or real United Muslim Community.<sup>75</sup>

### **The Problem with Religious Nationalism**

Peter Van der Veer, in his work *Religious Nationalism* wherein he offers a case study of Hindu and Muslim religious struggles in India, tries to interpret this phenomenon by describing it as ‘religious nationalism’. It is doubtful however whether such a problematic doctrine truly reflects reality or is merely an unfounded allegation. The author himself, being aware of this problem, says,

The claim that something like religious nationalism exists will be rejected by many students of nationalism for the simple reason that both nationalism and its theory depend on a Western discourse of modernity. This discourse constitutes the ‘traditional’ as its antithesis and interprets difference as backwardness. A crucial element of the discourse of modernity is the opposition of the ‘religious’ to the ‘secular’.<sup>76</sup>

Van der Veer’s response to this objection does not seem satisfactory. He points out two factors which are to him necessary for understanding religious nationalism in India: first, “*an analysis of ‘traditional’ that is not prejudiced by the discourse of modernity*” and second, “*a theory of the impact of colonialism and orientalism that does not deny agency to colonial subjects.*”<sup>77</sup>

Van der Veer’s main illustration of his argument depends on just one event that happened in Ayodhya, an important religious centre in India.<sup>78</sup> There was an old mosque in Ayodhya “*that had been long under dispute between Hindus and Muslims.*” This site, according to Hindu tradition, was the birthplace of Lord Rama the prime god of Ayodhya.”

Van der Veer describes the event as such:

In 1982, however, the relative peace of the place was suddenly disrupted when a campaign ‘to liberate the birthplace of Lord Rama’ was launched. The initiative was taken not by local monks but by a Hindu nationalist movement with branches all over the country.<sup>79</sup> ... Hundreds of people have died in riots between Hindus and Muslims.<sup>80</sup>

Finally, on 6 December 1992, the mosque was demolished by a Hindu mob. Van der Veer concludes that: The Ayodhya case reflects all the elements of religious nationalism in which I have come to be interested. While this book is not principally about Ayodhya, the Ayodhya case is taken here as the main illustration of my argument.<sup>81</sup>

He then attempts to show that religious nationalism “*builds on a previous construction of religious community.*”<sup>82</sup>

What may be said in response to Van der Veer’s argument is that the case of Ayodhya reflects nothing more than a rigid religious bias and prejudice on the part of both Hindus and Muslims against one another. Like many disputes between people of different religious rites and sects, the Hindu-Muslim prejudice in the case under study is concerned with the religious traditional heritage of both sides and not with their nationalism.

This comment seems sound when one considers the definition of nationalism as being opposed to religion and religious customs. Even the distinction between the sacred languages of Hinduism and Islam, as it is another aspect of Van der Veer’s argument,<sup>83</sup> cannot support the idea of religious nationalism, because first, it is problematic to state that language

itself may play an important role in the formation of nationalism, and second, the sacredness of language is more relevant to the description of a religion than of a nationality.

Another case-example of the so-called religious nationalism is illustrated by Martha Lee. Considering the African American movement, Lee goes on to elaborate a kind of the black Americans' religious movement.

Her attempts have no further result than to affirm a significant role and place for religion in awakening the black nation of America. There is no doubt that religion played such an important role in encouraging the black nation to re-discover their humanity and identity and in helping them to direct their destiny.<sup>84</sup> Martha Lee remarks:

The Black population of the United States has long struggled to find its identity in the context of the society and republic in which it must exist. This struggle is not surprising; the political question "*who are we?*" must be answered by reflection upon and interpretation of the past. ... As Black Americans know well, slavery is an institution that denies humanity and political visibility.

A restoration of their community therefore requires a comprehensive explanation of their origins and an interpretation of the meaning of their existence.<sup>85</sup>

The same author then concludes: "*One of the most appropriate ways to examine this problem is through religion.*"<sup>86</sup> In reaction to what Lee indicates, I believe one should be cautious about interpreting or recognizing this role of religion as religious nationalism.

## Conclusion

Due to their respective principles and characteristics, Islam and nationalism each has its own message, teachings and space. We have seen that since the very beginning, Islam has discouraged tribalism, racism and prejudice in all of their forms.

This discouragement extends itself to the realm of nationalism in the modern age. In fact, considering its negative attitude towards nationalism, it cannot be said that Islam regards internationalism in any more positive a light. This is because the concept of internationalism is too restricted to represent Islamic social thought.

The idea that emerges out from within the Qur'an and Islamic tradition indicates that Islam, on a universal scale, calls for the creation of a single community and encourages humankind to practice justice and to live in peace. Imam 'Ali, in his address to Malik Ashtar on appointing him as the governor of Egypt, wrote:

Remember, Malik, that among your subjects there are two kinds of people: those who have the same religion as yourself and they are brothers unto you and those who have other religions than yours and yet are human beings like you ... Let your mercy and compassion come to their rescue and help in the same way and to the same extent that you expect God to show mercy and forgiveness to you.<sup>87</sup>

Although nationalism did emerge within the Muslim world, nevertheless, the movement was never derived from Islamic teachings. The only thing that we may find in Islamic tradition is a hadith that advocates devotion to one's nation: *"One's love for his country is a matter of faith."*

Some Muslim scholars believe that this saying contains a mystical rather than a patriotic message. The famous poet Iqbal says, *"Our hearts do not belong to any homeland, whether it be Greece, India, Syria or elsewhere. In fact, there is no border encircling us or defining us other than Islam."*<sup>88</sup>

Regardless however of its mystical sense, the hadith encourages Muslim believers of every nation to work hard in achieving material benefit for their respective homelands. It urges them to make progress in every field of knowledge in order to meet, and thus avoid having to be dependent on non-Muslim countries.

Again the hadith, heartening Muslims to show their love for and loyalty towards their homelands, declares a supranational message for all Muslim nations and does not restrict itself to a specific nation.<sup>89</sup>

As Soekarno states, *"...true Islam requires all its adherents to love and to work for the country in which they reside, to love and to work for the people among whom they live."*<sup>90</sup> Finally, love and loyalty are derived from our instinctive feelings and consciousness, whereas nationalism is an ideology whose birth place was the political arena.<sup>91</sup>

The people of a nation may express the same love and loyalty towards their great figures of science, their national pride, their epic history and all their distinguished achievements. Islam, which encourages Muslims to respect their own material and spiritual values and wealth as well as to be independent and steadfast in their loyalties, is certainly not opposed to this kind of attitude.

Muslims are allowed to take pride in their nation loyalties so far they do not encourage or cause any prejudice in theory or in practice. The Qur'an condemns only those who sacrifice the faith by clinging to ancestors or by aping national figures. There is no problem as such with imitating these personalities so long it does not conflict with Islamic teachings.

In accordance with the divine teachings and prophetic missions, Muslims are requested not to follow the example of any one whose path is in direct contradiction to God's commands.<sup>92</sup> As depicted in the Qur'an, prophets were continually being responded by their people that what they taught "*was against the prevalent customs and traditions of the country*" and those of their ancestors.

The prophets strived to call people to the Oneness of God, to the monotheistic faith, but the people's response was that they observed their fathers' customs and wanted to follow them.<sup>93</sup>

A global education seems necessary to ultimately create mutual understanding and cooperation between the different nations of the world. It is the obligation of Muslim educators in particular and all others in general to cooperate with one another in order to provide a peaceful global environment. The survival of our planet earth greatly depends upon our carrying out this obligation.

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## Notes

1. Baron, *Modern Nationalism and Religion*, (New York: 1947), p. 269.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 270-271.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 269.
4. Soekarno, *Nationalism*, p. 47.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
6. Sayyid Abul Ala Mawdoodi, *The Political Theory of Islam*, (Hind: Delhi, 1964), p. 40.
7. Vatikiotis, *Islam and State*, p. 10.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Imam Rida, *Eighty Eight Aphorisms*, (Iran: Mashhad: 1992), pp. 72-73, 87 & 92.
10. "The best and most respected virtue of a man is to do good, to help the persecuted man and to fulfil the desires of the needy", *Ibid.*, p. 10.
11. Khadduri, *War and Peace*, pp. 3-4.
12. For more details see also the author's article on Kawmiyya (Nationalism) in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new edition, edited by E. Van Donzel, B. Lewis and Ch. Pellat, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978), v. 4, pp. 781-784.
13. Vatikiotis, *Islam and State*, pp. 10-11.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Perhaps it is understood from the verse: "Allah never gives by any means the unbelievers a way against the believers", *The Qur'an*, 4: 141.
17. Kohn, *A History of Nationalism*, p. 40.
18. Cf. Mutahhari, *Khadamat*, pp. 39-40.
19. *The Qur'an*, 6: 61.
20. *Ibid.*, 15: 123.
21. Mutahhari, *Khadamat*, p. 40.
22. *The Qur'an*, 3: 95.
23. *Ibid.*, 22: 78.
24. Hess Andrew C. *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, editor in chief John L. Esposito, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), v. 3, "MILLET", p. 107
25. R. Paret, *First Encyclopaedia of Islam*, "UMMA", (Leidoni: New York: E. J. Brill, 1987), v. 8, p. 1015.
26. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri, *Islam in Various Perspectives*, (Lahore: Model Town, 1986), p. 153.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 154.
28. Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i known as 'Allama, is one of the contemporary Shi'i philosophers and exegetes, whose major work on the Qur'an, *al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an*, containing 20 volumes (Beirut: 1970) is considered to be the most distinguished example of the cross-reference exegesis of the Qur'an.
29. *Ibid.*, 2: 213.
30. *Ibid.*, 16: 120.
31. *Ibid.*, 12: 45.
32. *Ibid.*, 23: 52.
33. *Ibid.*, 21: 92.
34. *Tabataba'i, al-Mizan, English*, v. 3, p.182.
35. *Ibid.*
36. *Ibid.*, Arabic, v. 1, pp. 296-297.
37. *The Qur'an*, 21: 92.
38. *Tabataba'i, al-Mizan, English*, v. 3, p. 182.
39. *Ibid.*, v. 10, p. 29.
40. R. Paret, *First Encyclopaedia of Islam*, v. 8, p. 1015.
41. Ibn Hisham, *al-Sirat al-Nabawiyya*, (Cairo: 1955), 2nd ed., v. 1, pp. 501-502.
42. Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, translated into English by A. Guillaume, (London, New York, Toronto: 1955), pp. 231-232.
43. Tahir-ul-Qadri, *Islam*, p. 154.
44. R. Paret, *First Encyclopaedia of Islam*, v. 8, p. 1015.
45. *Ibid.*, also see: Tahir-ul-Qadri, *Islam*, p. 154.
46. Khadduri, *War and Peace*, p. 4.

47. The Qur'an, 22: 78, see: Tahir-ul-Qadri, Islam, p. 154.
48. The Qur'an, 22: 40-42 & 2: 198.
49. Ibn Ishaq, The Life, pp. 212-213.
50. The Qur'an, 2: 213.
51. Tabataba'i, al-Mizan, (Beirut: 1957/8-1974), v. 14, pp. 322-323.
52. Ibid., English, v. 3, p. 182.
53. Ibid., p. 183.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid., p. 184.
57. Ibid.
58. The Qur'an, 3: 19.
59. Tabataba'i, al-Mizan, English, v. 3, p. 167.
60. Ibid., p. 168.
61. Ibid.
62. Ibid., p. 177.
63. Ibid.
64. Ibid.
65. Ibid., p. 174.
66. The Qur'an, 33: 72.
67. Ibid., 70: 19.
68. Ibid., 14: 34.
69. Ibid., 96: 6-7.
70. Tabataba'i, al-Mizan, English, v. 3, p. 174.
71. For more details see: Naqawi, al-Islam, p. 31; also Uner Turgay, The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World, v. 3, NATION, pp. 232-234.
72. Tabataba'i, al-Mizan, English, v. 3, p. 177.
73. The Qur'an, 49: 10, "The believers are but brethren ..."
74. Mutahhari, Khadamat, p. 35.
75. Ibid., pp. 34-35.
76. Peter Van der Veer, Religious Nationalism, (London: University of California Press, 1994), p. x.
77. Ibid.
78. A Hindu pilgrimage center in Uttar Pradesh, a province in North India. Ibid.
79. The Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), an organization of religious leaders. Ibid. p. 1.
80. Ibid., p. xi.
81. Ibid.
82. Ibid., p. xiii.
83. Ibid., pp. xiii-xiv.
84. Cf. Martha Lee, The Nation of Islam, An American Millenarian Movement, (Queenston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1988), pp. 1-2.
85. Ibid.
86. Ibid. p. 2.
87. Hazrat Ali, Nahjul Balagha, translated into English by Syed Mohammed Askari Jafery, (India: Poona: 1967), pp. 485-486.
88. Naqawi, al-Islam, p. 7. Another mystical interpretation of the same hadith is represented by the famous mystic poet Mawlawi. See: Jalal al-Din Muhammad Mawlawi, Mathnawi-e Ma'nawi-e Mawlawi, (Tehran: Jawidan, 1987), pp. 739-740.
89. Ibid. p. 59.
90. Soekarno, Nationalism, p. 48.
91. Cf. Naqawi, al-Islam, p. 59.
92. Muhajir, Islam, p. 7.
93. Ibid. The Qur'an, 21: 53.

