STUDI
CONTRIBUTIONS

Nationalism and Islamism: The Mediterranean Context

Joseph Ellul

> It was toward the end of the First World War. The school had a young principal enflamed with patriotism. Because the boy's father was a committee member of the Nationalist Party[1] and a subscriber to a daily newspaper, his home became a meeting place for the men of the village who were Nationalist Party supporters. Included in this group was the young headmaster, who established a close friendship with our friend's father. The boy was allowed to attend some of the discussions that took place during these meetings but others took place secretly and no one knew anything about them…
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> The feelings of the entire village were on the side of Turkey, the State of the Islamic Caliphate, and against the Allies, who represented the "unbelievers" and were fighting Islam. It seemed that certain feelings began to ferment. He remembers that now and realizes that even though he was a child he, like the men, had the feeling that some as yet ill-defined thing was going to happen. He did not know what it was or how it would occur, but that it would definitely happen. Secret meetings took place at his house.[2]

The above passage is an excerpt from an autobiographical memoir of the early life of Sayyid Quṭb, the Muslim writer and activist who was born and raised in Muša, a village in Asyūt Province in Upper Egypt, and executed by the Egyptian government in 1966. He is known for having provided through his writings the ideological base for the *Muslim Brotherhood* founded in Egypt by Hasan al-Banna (d. 1949) in 1928. The memoir was written between 1945 and 1946, only two or three years before Quṭb turned to Islamist ideology, yet the book itself shows no sign of that forthcoming radical shift in his thought.

1. The development of Nationalism and Islamism

When discussing the subject of nationalism and Islamism, particularly though not exclusively within the context of the Arab Mediterranean world, one is referring to two somewhat opposing concepts but which at times tend to cross each other's paths. Both in fact have essentially ideological roots. The first takes its inspiration primarily from secular political thought (as with the case of the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1924) although, as we have noted in the above passage, the Muslim 'ingredient' is always present. The second abides by a doctrine whose aim is to portray Islam as encompassing all of society.[3] Both, however, have been triggered by the often dramatic political events that have left their mark on Islamic societies since the late nineteenth century as a result of the Muslim[4] world's encounter and engagement with modern European thought through the vehicle of colonialism.

The term 'nationalism' in the Arab world meant many things to many people. For some it meant identification with a specific country's cultural and religious identity, thereby according it a rather territorial connotation. Others gave it a decidedly broader understanding in order to convey the concept of a wider Arab identity.

Nationalist movements in the Muslim world developed the concept of a national identity in the wake of the struggle for independence that they spearheaded in their native countries. What needs to be kept in mind is that nationalism is also conditioned by the boundaries and frontiers that were put in place by the colonial powers as they carved up continents and regions in order to suit their military, political and commercial ambitions. As with the case of Europe, nationhood became a basis for statehood.

But similar to the policies adopted by the non-Muslim world, these movements had their own vision of the path that their future independent country was to take. In most cases this vision was greatly influenced by the concept of the nation-state harboured by their former non-Muslim European rulers. Love of one's homeland and country (*waṭan*) was an inherited idea. Nevertheless, as one may have noticed in the opening quotation from Sayyid Quṭb, Islam had consistently been in some way a featured part of any Muslim society, especially at the grassroots level.

All of the above observations require careful consideration, if we are to understand truly the tension that still exists today in most Muslim countries between the concept of the state on the one hand and Muslim identity on the other. In some countries both concepts have co-existed with varying degrees of success (Tunisia, Egypt, Indonesia), whereas in others Muslim identity became paramount or predominant (Pakistan, Sudan). In any event, both Nationalism and Islamism had to contend with other socio-political movements as the call for independence heralded the entrance of many Muslim countries into the modern world. As Youssef Choueiri has judiciously observed:

> Throughout the 1950s the new middle classes and intellectuals in the Islamic world increasingly detached themselves from the old order of city notables, landowners and property speculators. Junior army officers, schoolteachers, civil servants, engineers, doctors, workers and students all joined in working for a new political and economic system. Some succeeded, others failed. Whatever the outcome, there was a perceptible drive towards turning the institutions of the state into a vehicle of development, planning and nation building…
> However, nationalism on its own is neither a political ideology nor a comprehensive programme of socio-economic principles; it merely serves to define a territorial identity with certain cultural and national characteristics. In other words, nationalism may assume a variety of ideological contents, and appeal to a wide spectrum of social classes. In the Muslim world, nationalism entered the political field in conjunction with liberal democracy, socialism, Islamism, secularism and Fascism.[5]

Islamism, on the other hand, still looks at past European colonial occupation of the Muslim world in religious terms.

Thus, a country with a majority Christian population is considered a Christian state. Consequently, European countries that ruled over much of Africa, the entire Middle East, and a sizeable part of Asia are considered not as secular but as Christian in their political makeup, even though Christendom had long ceased to be the defining principle of a nation, and Christianity had long lost its influence on the policies of nation-states that originated in the aftermath of the Reformation and that found their ultimate expression in the French Revolution.

The creation of independent nation-states in the Muslim world was ultimately founded on non-religious concepts that had been in place in Europe for at least two centuries, and which had already influenced them by way of education, scientific and technological progress, and in particular of the introduction of the press and the publication of newspapers. Furthermore, the majority of these newly-formed states inherited the political and economic systems of their former colonial masters, whether in the form of capitalism, liberalism, or socialism. In other words, most of the governing parties were openly nationalist, secular, and thoroughly modernistic. It was therefore obvious that at some point in time they would clash with traditional social structures and religious groupings in their effort to modernise their countries. Most governments in these newly-independent states set out on a programme of reform in many sectors. They promoted advances in women's rights especially in the realm of personal and family law, although they were careful to accomplish these through a selective interpretation of the Qurʾân.[6] Other governments set out on a campaign of agrarian reform that overhauled the entire way of life in rural societies and brought about a wave of emigration from the countryside to the main towns and cities.[7] This was accompanied in some instances by a process of nationalization of companies.[8]

In many ways, therefore, nationalism in the Muslim world as inspired by European secular thought was (and still is) perceived by Islamists as being in direct contradiction with the universal tenets of Islam. Such a contradiction has inspired Islamists to work for the establishment of a state, which, through the implementation of *Šarīʿa*, would transcend national boundaries and consequently would define territory in terms of religious affiliation. Once again, as Choueiri states:

> By contrast, Islamic radicalism, operating under different conditions, had to contend with a novel dilemma: the total eclipse of Islam, brought about by the ungodly innovations of secular nation-states. Consequently, the question of rescuing the Muslims from stagnation and ossification became redundant. The reinstatement of Islam, the bedrock of the nation and its unequivocal identity, figured as the most urgent task of a new generation of believers. From being a culture, a code of ethics or a weapon of defence, Islam henceforth turned into a totalitarian ideology. Furthermore, the circumstances and rules of this unprecedented engagement obliterated the distance between the past and the present, reducing the former to a faithful servant of the latter.[9]

But nationalism in the Muslim world had to contend with an equally secular and modern trend that was gradually gaining ground in Egypt and in the Middle East, namely Arab nationalism or *pan-Arabism*. As one may perceive from the nomenclature, the emphasis here lies on a perceived common Arab heritage and ideal among countries in the Middle-East and North Africa. This concept of the Arab nation was intended to transcend territorial and religious boundaries and unite the peoples of the Arab world, irrespective of their religious affiliations by appealing to their common Arab identity and heritage.

Both these approaches inspired many Islamist ideologues, such as Sayyid Quṭb in Egypt and Abū 'l ʿAlā Mawdūdī in the Indian sub-continent, to condemn nationalism and pan-Arabism on numerous counts:[10]

a. Post-independence governments that have adopted either territorial or Arab nationalism have relegated religion to a marginal role in society. In doing so they have followed non-Muslim ways of thinking and are therefore guilty of having led the people to *ǧāhiliyya* (the pre-Islamic condition of religious ignorance).[11] Among those on the receiving end of such accusations was President Gamāl ʿAbd al-Nāṣir of Egypt (d. 1970), with his brand of socialism and pan-Arabism, and Ḥabīb Bourghiba of Tunisia (d. 2000), whose unique interpretation of the Qurʾān led him to identify *ǧihād* with the concept of working for the progress and advancement of Tunisia as a modern nation.[12]

b. Secularism has detached people from the restraints applied by religious morality. Nationalism has made people selfish and arrogant. Democracy, which is a Western invention, has given way to social anarchy and has relegated God to the periphery of society. This is in direct contravention of the absolute authority of God as Creator and sole Legislator.[13]

c. In order to claim legitimacy in the Muslim world, nationalism and secular doctrine have ascribed to Islam characteristics belonging to foreign political systems thereby adulterating and distorting Muslim teaching.[14]

d. Capitalism and liberalism have filled the earth with corruption and aggression. The reaction to both was socialism which is equally the work of the devil.[15]

Nationalism (whether territorial or Arab) has therefore been accused of being divisive and incompatible with Muslim universalist thought.

2. The perceived failure of nationalism and the rise of Islamism

Following the initial years of enthusiasm triggered by the granting of independence or (as with the case of Egypt and Libya) a coup d'état, the hopes of many in the Arab world gradually began to give way to doubts and frustration. Some governments clearly demonstrated they were in no way immune to corruption and misuse of public funds. Public money ended up in the

pockets of ministers, their families and their friends and cronies. Standards of living remained low and from the economic standpoint little if any change took place. As stated above, there were of course progressive reforms as regards, for example, the status of women and the revision of family law and laws of personal status, but these new enactments also triggered adverse reactions from religious authorities. Discontent aroused by both social change and economic inequality brought about public demonstrations in the streets of many capitals followed by brutal suppression, imprisonment, torture and execution of dissidents.

What appeared to be so liberating about independence was soon transformed into another nightmare of oppression, as one ruler followed another which at times led to civil war. To cite but a few cases, Ḥabīb Bourghiba was succeeded by Chadli Benǧedīd;[16] Houari Boumedienne (d. 1978) was followed by Zīn al-ʿĀbidīn b. ʿAlī, who was overthrown during the uprising in Tunisia which took place in December 2010 and which heralded the so-called 'Arab Spring'. And Gamāl ʿAbd al-Nāṣir was succeeded by Anwār al-Sādāt (d. 1981). All maintained a firm grip on power leading to the continued erosion of democracy and the establishment of totalitarianism.

The bankruptcy of the political programmes of the elite, particularly in North Africa and in the Middle East, was laid bare in the wake of two events that have shaken the Muslim world. The first was the Six-Day War during which the dream of Arab nationalism was totally destroyed. The Egyptian army was all but annihilated when Israel captured the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, took the Golan Heights from Syria, and annexed East Jerusalem and the West Bank from Jordan. From that moment onwards, the then President of Egypt ʿAbd al-Nāṣir decided to turn his attention wholly to domestic affairs. Another consequence of the Six Day War was that it left the Egyptian economy in tatters while the infrastructure of the state was crumbling. In his later speeches, right up until his death on 28 September 1970, President ʿAbd al-Nāṣir made the concept of a strong state a vital prerequisite to Arab nationalism. This secondary role continued under the policy of his successor Muḥammad Anwār al-Sādāt who embarked on a process of de-Nasserization and the rehabilitation of the Muslim Brotherhood, followed by the policies of his successor Hosnī Mubārak who depended heavily upon military aid from the United States.[17]

Thus, totalitarian regimes, which had for decades fed their people the dream of national pride and Arab unity, came to appear increasingly out of touch with the masses and their religious base, especially with the younger generation. The *coup-de-grace* of Arab nationalism and unity took place when President Sādāt was assassinated by Aḥmad Šawqī al-Islāmbūlī, a member of the Islamic Ǧihād Movement, on 6 October 1981 while he was presiding over an army parade marking the 1973 invasion of the Sinai Peninsula. Barely a month prior to Sādāt's assassination Jean-Pierre Péroncel Hugoz, Cairo correspondent for the French daily *Le Monde*, had warned of the danger that the President was facing, owing to the infiltration of Islamists in the Egyptian army following the Camp David Peace Accord and later of the proclamation of Jerusalem as the undivided capital of the Jewish state on the part of the Israeli government. Not only did his warning go unheeded, but he was also expelled from the country by the military. In his work *Le Radeau de Mahomet* (*The Raft of Muḥammad*) published in 1983 Péroncel Hugoz had predicted the expansion and rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, which would eventually take place (albeit briefly) in 2011.

Slowly but surely Islamism began to paint itself as the only way out of the prolonged humiliation brought about first by colonialism and then by corrupt governments which survived only through "Western" aid and intelligence. It believed (and still does) in the necessity that Muslims return to the "golden age" when the Prophet resided in Medina and laid the groundwork for Islam as religion and state. Islamism thrives upon the realization of this dream. At times it leans toward a rather "eschatological" interpretation of the Qurʾân that envisages the submission of the entire world to Islam. Furthermore, Islamist movements such as ISIS and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt have in their final days in power added a decidedly "apocalyptic" approach in preaching an Islam that is absolute and invincible even when all they see around them are ashes created by their own false dreams.[18] They attribute success in the present world to religious piety through the implementation of *Šarīʿa*.

The apparent failure of nationalism to address the needs of many Muslims, coupled with the rise of Islamism that has continued to paint itself as the only solution to all current problems, has led to the present *cul de sac* with which all the predominantly Muslim countries are wrestling. Sayyid Quṭb's transition from nationalist aspiration to Islamist idealism is a timely warning that these countries are still grappling with their own identity and that they are nowhere near finding a way out of this tragic impasse.

NOTES

[1] The Nationalist Party (*al-Ḥizb al-Waṭanī*) was founded in 1907 by Muṣṭafā Kāmil (1874–1908). It called for the immediate removal of British presence from Egypt and the promotion of the country within the wider Ottoman and Islamic realm

[2] Sayyid Quṭb, *A Child from the Village*, Edited, Translated and with an Introduction by John Calvert and William Shephard, New York: Syracuse University Press, p. 92.

[3] This holds true especially for those countries where *Šarīʿa* is implemented on all levels of society.

[4] Throughout this essay I will be referring to the term 'Islamic' in the wider cultural and social framework. In this sense Christians living in Muslim-majority countries belong to Islamic culture. The term 'Muslim' is applied in a strictly religious sense. The term 'Islamist' describes that doctrine applied by Muslim movements and organizations that tend to give a decidedly political and ideological interpretation of the Qurʾân.

[5] Youssef M. Choueiri, *Islamic Fundamentalism: The Story of Islamist Movements*, 3rd Edition London & New York: Continuum, 2010, pp. 79–80.

[6] One case in point was the abolition of polygamy in Tunisia. When legislating in this area lawmakers took as a basis Q. 4:129, which states:

> You will never be able to treat your wives with equal fairness, however much you may desire to do so, but do not ignore one wife altogether, leaving her suspended [between marriage and divorce].

The above verse, which appears to indicate the incapacity of men to treat their wives with equity, was taken as a justification for the prohibition of polygamy. Also, religious tribunals in Tunisia were suppressed by Bourghiba. See Gabriel Martinez-Groz and Lucette Valensi, *L'Islam, l'islamisme et l'Occident: Genèse d'un affrontement*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2004, p. 254 ff.

[7] Egypt, for example, in 1860 had a population of 5.5 million. Today it numbers 60 million and counting.

[8] One case in point was the nationalization of the Suez Canal by ʿAbd al-Nāṣir in 1956. See *ibid*. p. 261ff.

[9] Choueiri, *op. cit*., pp. 87–88.

[10] Once again, as Choueiri states:

> Modern Islamic radicalism is characterized by its fierce opposition to the concept and movement of nationalism. It perceived the paramountcy of the nation-state in its secular and ideological connotations as a direct threat to the establishment of Muslim norms of loyalty and conduct. Whereas nationalists consider the nation or its institutions the ultimate source of sovereignty and legitimacy, Islamic radicalism asserts the categorical principles of an immutable divine order.

Choueiri, *op. cit*., p. 131.

[11] See, for instance, Abū 'l-Aʿlā Maududī, *Bayna al-daʿwa l-qawmiyya wa al-rābiṭa al-islāmiyya*, Cairo: Dār al-Ansār, pp. 9–15.

[12] Bourghiba once caused enormous scandal when during the month of Ramaḍān he went on air and in front of millions of Tunisians drank a glass of orange juice.

[13] See Maududī, 'Bayn al-ḥadratayn al-ġarbiyya wa 'l-Islāmiyya', in *al-Muslimūn*, vol. 7 (9), pp. 867–868.

[14] Sayyid Quṭb, *Fī Ẓilāl al-Quran*, Beirut: Dār al-Šurūq, vol. IV, pp. 2075–2076.

[15] See Maududī, 'Al-ʿAdāla al-iğtimāʿiyya' in *al-Muslimūn*, vol. 8 (2,3), pp. 136. 257.

[16] The reign of terror in Algeria in the 1990s is still fresh in the memory of many people. When Chadli Benğedīd stepped down and elections were called, the *FIS* (*Islamic Salvation Front*) had won the first round. Almost immediately the army intervened and the second round was cancelled followed by the imposition of military rule. What ensued was a decade of terror attacks perpetrated by both army agents and the radical *GIA* (*Islamic Group of Algeria*) that left thousands of people dead.

[17] The state of moral and political bankruptcy in Egypt toward the end of the Mubārak regime have been vividly portrayed in Alā al-Aswāny's novel *Yacoubian Building*. The country appeared to be more like a gunpowder storage facility ready to ignite by the stroke of a match.

[18] Hazem Kandil has left us a stark description of the Muslim Brotherhood's last stand at the Rābiʿa al-ʾAdawiya mosque in Cairo during the tragic summer of 2013 as they were being surrounded by the Egyptian army and called upon to surrender:

> For 40 days, unsuspecting Egyptians tuned in (some even strolled in) to witness for themselves what the Brothers said and did. It was a rare opportunity to eavesdrop on this exceptionally discreet group. And what the people saw and heard was somewhat different from what they were used to from the normally polished Brothers: political competitors were religiously condemned; images of Prophet Muhammad's epic battles were conjured; biblical stories, from David and Moses to Armageddon, were invoked; claims that the Archangel Gabriel prayed at the Islamist campsite were flaunted; and sacred visions were relayed on stage night after night. This was not the vocabulary Brothers typically employed in their public interactions. Almost overnight, many Egyptians panicked. Who were these strangers, they wondered? …
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> As the political showdown approached, the daughter of the Brotherhood's effective leader was caught screaming on television: "God will part the sea for us! Just wait and see!" She was echoing one of the many prophecies circulating during the sit-in: that the soldiers of Pharaoh had trapped the Brothers just as they had done with the ancient Hebrews, and if the Brothers kept faith with Morsi, as their predecessors did with Moses, a miracle was shortly at hand.

Hazem Kandil, *Inside the Brotherhood*, Cambridge (UK): Polity Press, 2015, pp. 1–2 ∎