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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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Islam and Nationalism: A Theoretical Point of View Part 1

Sayyid Ahmad Rahnamaei

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.¹ 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.²

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."³

Embodied in the term Islam, the Prophet's teachings "were to constitute the final and definitive religion to all people."⁴ 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."⁵ This concept forms part of the Islamic state.⁶

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."⁷

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.[8](#)

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 [9](#)...

... 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.[10](#)

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

In 1882 Ernest Renan[11](#) 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.[12](#)

Soekarno quoting Otto Bauer,[13](#) 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."[14](#)

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.'[15](#)

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.[16](#)

The well-known American nationalist theoretician, Carlton Hayes, trying not to moor the word "nation" to any exact dictionary definition[17](#), states that "In simplest terms, nationalism may be defined as fusion of

patriotism with a consciousness of nationality.¹⁸ 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."¹⁹

He also states: "Every nationality of which I have knowledge has been, or is, biologically and racially, a melting pot."²⁰

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.²¹

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."²²

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.²³

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.[24](#)

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"[25](#)

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.[26](#)

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.[27](#)

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.[28](#)

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.[29](#)

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,[30](#)" and also professed that "Our religion is the same as our politics and our politics is the same as our religion."[31](#)

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.[32](#)

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"[33](#)

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.[34](#)

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..[35](#)

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."[36](#)

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.[37](#)

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.[38](#)

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.[39](#)

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.[40](#)"

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.[41](#)

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."[42](#) Imam Khomeini clearly identified nationalism with reactionary forces and with colonial powers who encouraged nationalistic feelings among Muslims in order to foster disunity.[43](#)

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[44](#) are the touchstones of nationalism. Ibn Khaldun remarks that "'asabiyyah is one of the fundamental elements of nationalism."[45](#)

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)."[46](#) 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.[47](#)

'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."[48](#) 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.[49](#)

And Iqbal Lahuri says "Nationalism is another face of barbarism."[50](#)

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.[51](#)

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)."[52](#) 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.[53](#)

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.[54](#)

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.[55](#)

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.[56](#)

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 ... [57](#)

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."[58](#) 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.[59](#)

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,"[60](#) regarded "religion as the true life-force." All evil, according to him are rooted in the lack of religion.[61](#)

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."[62](#)

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.[63](#)

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.[64](#)

This religious sense has survived throughout the history of humankind as a natural and normal sense.⁶⁵ 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.⁶⁶

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 vernacular⁶⁷, 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.⁶⁸

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."⁶⁹ 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, *milliyyat-parasti*)⁷⁰. Sometimes it is believed that nationalism is similar to religion (*shibh-i din*) in having its own god, prophet, constitution and laws⁷¹. It seems obvious that nationalism in this sense represents a new religion. It is also considered as a great obstacle to Muslim unification⁷². 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.⁷³

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 20th 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.[74](#)

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.[75](#)

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.[76](#)

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)[77](#). 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.[78](#)

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.[79](#) 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."⁸⁰ 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.⁸¹

'Urubah (Arabism) may be defined as taking pride in being the inheritor of the Arab as well as Muslim culture heritage.⁸² 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.⁸³

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."⁸⁴

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."⁸⁵ '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.⁸⁶

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.[87](#)

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[88](#). He stated that there is no nationality for Muslims except Islam[89](#).

Sayyid was chief among individuals who "were the first to seize upon the Pan-Islamic idea, and became its propagandists."[90](#) 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."[91](#)

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."[92](#)

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[93](#), 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."[94](#) 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."[95](#)

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.[96](#)

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.[97](#)

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.[98](#)

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.⁹⁹

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."¹⁰⁰ 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."¹⁰¹

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."¹⁰²

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.¹⁰³

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.¹⁰⁴ 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." [105](#)

To be continued.

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[1.](#) The Qur'an, 49: 10.

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[7.](#) This passage occurs four times in the Qur'an: 12: 104; 38: 87; 68: 52; 81: 27.

[8.](#) Cf. M.R. Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, Islam and World Peace: Explanations of a Sufi, (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: 1987), pp. 37 & 98.

[9.](#) Hans Kohn, Nationalism; Its Meaning and History, (New York: 1965), p. 4.

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