Ummah or Nation?

**Identity Crisis in Contemporary Muslim Society**

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Preface

The Muslim world is today passing through a period of creative tension.

It has recently re-emerged from a long night of colonial domination by the West and is confronted with a world in the making of which its own role was almost non-existent. As such it has to face a world made for it by others, a world far removed from its own vision.

In its struggle against colonialism, it has successfully broken many a political chain; yet it finds itself constrained by a number of other shackles: intellectual, psychological, cultural, and economic and techno- logical. The crisis that engulfed it during the last three centuries was not exclusively a product of external factors; its own internal weaknesses and failings had a role to play, both in generating internal decay and in its failure to resist external onslaughts. Nonetheless, during the last century it has been able to face the crisis defiantly. Now almost everywhere there is a new upsurge and the hallmark of this upsurge is a rediscovery of their Islamic identity, particularly at the level of the Muslim people. The gods of secularism, nationalism, liberalism and socialism have failed to capture the soul of the Muslim people, notwithstanding the damage their onslaughts have inflicted and the bleeding wounds they have left all around. The Muslim people, particularly the youth, are once again deriving fresh inspiration from the eternal sources of Muslim identity: the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet (peace be upon him). The Ummah is still in the grip of a tension, yet the clouds of intellectual hegemony of Western concepts and models of society and culture are beginning to dissipate. There is a breath of fresh air and the light of creativity is illuminating the horizon. The Ummah is striving to be on its own. It still has a long way to go; yet there is the realization that it is set along the right road. The political system the West gave to the world, particularly after the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), was characterized by secularism, nation-state and liberal capitalistic democracy. Since World War II nationalist fever has died down in most of the Western nations. There is an increasing awareness of interdependence and need for super-national politico-economic structures to cope with the new challenges. The fall of socialism and the prolonged crisis of capitalism have led to people's disenchantment with current ideologies and politico-economic systems. The cultural pathways of contemporary history are littered with fallen idols of every color, shape and size. The search for new models has become more pronounced. It is time to seriously reflect on what Muhammad Iqbal said in his lectures on Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam:

Both nationalism and atheistic socialism, at least in the present state of human adjustments, must draw upon the psychological forces of hate, suspicion and resentment which tend to impoverish the soul of man and close up his hidden sources of spiritual energy. Neither the technique of medieval mysticism nor nationalism nor atheistic socialism can cure the ills of a despairing humanity. Surely the present moment is one of great crisis in the history of modern culture. The modern world stands in need of biological renewal. And religion, which in its higher manifestations is neither dogma nor ritual, can alone ethically prepare the modern man for the burden of the great responsibility which the advancement of modern science necessarily involves, and restore to him that attitude of faith which makes him capable of winning a personality here and retaining it hereafter. It is only by rising to a fresh vision of his origin and future, his whence and whither, that man will eventually triumph over a society motivated by an inhuman competition, and a civilization which has lost its spiritual unity because of its inner conflict of religious and political values.

In this context, Iqbal's call was as under:

Humanity needs three things today: a spiritual interpretation of the Universe, spiritual emancipation of the individual, and basic principles of a universal import directing the evolution of human society on a spiritual basis... Believe me, Europe today is the greatest hindrance in the way of man's ethical advancement. The Muslim, on the other hand, is in possession of these ultimate ideas on the basis of a revelation Let the Muslim of today appreciate his position, reconstruct his social life in the light of ultimate principles, and evolve which is the ultimate aim of Islam. That spiritual democracy

It is only with this belief and this realization that the Islamic Ummah can have its rendezvous with destiny.

With these thoughts, I take this opportunity to introduce Dr. Abdullah al-Ahsan's new study: Ummah or Nation? Identity Crisis in Contemporary Muslim Society. The author has tried to examine the intellectual predicament of the Muslim world during the colonial and post-colonial period. After discussing the concept of Ummah as emerging from his reading of the Qur'an and Muslim history, Dr. al-Ahsan has tried to critically examine the influence of Western concepts of secularism and nation-state on the mind of the Muslim intellectuals and the political elite in three leading Muslim countries: Turkey, Egypt and Pakistan. He has also discussed some of the major contours of pan-Islamism in the twentieth century, particularly the Organization of the Islamic Conference and its sister institutions. The author has ably used in this study those techniques of analysis and interpretation which are the stock-in-trade of Western political scientists. His focus however is on Muslim intellectuals and the political leadership of the Muslim world, which by and large has been a product of Western influences on the world of Islam. In the interests of greater precision, it is essential to distinguish the thoughts of this elite, however important, from the real feelings and aspirations of the Muslim people. The author's primary focus is on the mind and behavior of the intellectual and political leadership of the Muslim countries and as such is a valuable contribution towards understanding not only the predicament of this class of people but also the plight of the Ummah as such. Yet the story would remain incomplete as long as it is not supplemented by an exhaustive and in-depth study of the aspirations and longings of the Muslim people and how they have influenced the course of events, sometimes positively, as in the case of the creation of Pakistan, and sometimes by restraining the leadership from surrendering to the Western modes of life and behavior. A number of Western scholars, from H.A.R. Gibb to Wilfred Cantwell Smith and John Vole are intrigued by this phenomenon. They exclaim: 'Throughout the modern era, it has been observed, the real dynamism of mass movements, even those led by secular leaders, has been generated by devotion to the faith' (Fundamentalism Observed, ed. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1991, p. 354). It is only by examining the aspirations and the motivation of the masses that the real soul of the Ummah can be laid bare. The challenge that besets the Muslim social scientist lies in widening his scope of inquiry in a manner that it could simultaneously cover the crisis and the way out, the predicament of the West-oriented leadership as well as its impact on the condition of the Ummah and the response and re-assertion of the soul of the Ummah and the reaction of the masses longing for the realization of the model of Madinah. There is no denying that the identity crisis is very much there, but it is also a reality that the inner dynamism of faith is carving a way out of the crisis. The nation-state continues to be a political reality in the Muslim world; yet the nation-state has never succeeded in becoming the center of individual or collective loyalty of the Muslim people. Even Wilfred Cantwell Smith admits: 'No Muslim people have evolved a national feeling that has meant a loyalty to or even concern for a community transcending the bounds of Islam' and that 'in the past, only Islam has provided for these people this type of discipline, inspiration and energy' (Islam in Modern History, Wilfred C. Smith, Princeton, 1957, p.77).

The identity crisis postmortem in this study will enable the reader to have a better understanding of the forces that have tried to shape the Muslim world during the last two centuries. As such it is a valuable contribution by a young Muslim political scientist and I welcome this effort. I would, however, like to add that the soul of the Ummah has survived this crisis by rediscovering from within its inner self the original vision of Islam. It is with the light of this vision that it is beginning to emerge from the crisis. The tension although very much there, is no longer passive and soul-benumbing. It is giving birth to a creative response in the form of almost universal movement leading to Islamic resurgence. And this inspires a new hope about the future destiny of the Ummah.

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