

Book Review

## Ummah or Nation: Identity Crisis in Contemporary Muslim Society

By *Abdullah al-Ahsan*. Leicester, UK: *The Islamic Foundation*, 1992/1413, 158 pp.

The interaction of societies and worldviews is one of the great themes of modern world history. Abdullah al-Ahsan makes an important contribution to the explanation and understanding of these interactions in the context of the Islamic world. In particular, he concentrates on the issues of ultimate sociopolitical identity and how it is affected by the attitudes and beliefs of modern Muslims: the dual loyalty to "nation" and to the greater Islamic community (ummah).

This book opens with a discussion of the term "ummah" and its conceptual development in Islamic history. Then it addresses the development of nationalism in the modern world, particularly during the colonial era in Turkey, Egypt, and South Asia, and leading to "the identity crisis of the modern Muslim." Al-Ahsan concludes with a discussion of contemporary transnational Muslim organizations, giving special attention to the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), which he describes as both a potentially *ummatic* entity and an organization of nation-states.

"The problematic relationship between European secular thought and traditional Islamic ideas has created an identity crisis in contemporary Muslim society" (p. 145), al-Ahsan says. This is not just a matter of the coexistence of different identities within an individual or group, which is natural; rather it involves defining a Muslim's "supreme loyalty." For such a loyalty to be successful it should "be strong enough to generate a sense of unity among its adherents and at the same time be flexible enough to accommodate other identities within its fold" (p. 146). This is a matter of individual identity and "an adherent should have the freedom

of choice in adopting the ideology of his supreme loyalty. Any predetermined factor weakens an ideology" (p. 146).

Within this framework, al-Ahsan argues that nationalism, the identity concept created by European secular thought, is a weak foundation for a supreme loyalty and does not work well even in the West: "The idea of nationalism has not been able to develop any mechanism to maintain an organic relationship between freedom, individual responsibility and morality" (p. 147). Indeed, "with the development of nationalism the Islamic ummah identity has lost the status of supreme loyalty of Muslims" because "Muslims themselves have not been able to adjust to the developments and discoveries in Europe" (pp. 148-9).

Fundamental Islamic values constitute an effective basis for a supreme *ummatic* loyalty in the contemporary world that would include national identity within a hierarchy of other secular identities. To define and achieve this will, al-Ahsan says, require the active involvement of Muslim intellectuals who "must decide about their supreme loyalty — whether it lies with the Islamic ummah identity or the ideas of European civilization" (p. 152).

This basic argument is at best persuasive but it also raises questions. There is an emphasis on the importance of older western sources of analysis and conceptualizations of key ideas. In particular, there is an implicit assumption that classical western definitions remain in control. Al-Ahsan correctly notes the importance of Hans Kohn in the development of the western conceptualizations of nationalism (pp. 31-32). However, he ends his discussion of the evolution of the western understanding of nationalism with scholars like Rupert Emerson and Karl Deutsch, who are identified as true successors to Kohn but who were major scholars of the 1950s and 1960s and not later.

After Deutsch and Emerson, significant new approaches to the understanding of nationalism emerged. These have involved more than simple revisionism and, in fact, reflect a whole new framework of analysis or paradigm shifts. The Kohn tradition viewed "nations" as entities essentially fixed in nature and based on "primordial" characteristics—somehow always there, waiting to be awakened and mobilized. New conceptualizations view national identities as products of individual and group world-views and perceptions. A "nation" here is a construct built on the basis of beliefs and self-perceptions; the nature of "nationalism" changes greatly as these beliefs and self-perceptions change. Anderson<sup>1</sup> claims that

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<sup>1</sup>Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991), p. 4. See also E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

both Marxist and liberal theory have become etiolated in a late Ptolemaic effort to 'save the phenomena'; and . . . a reorientation of perspective in, as it were, a Copernican spirit is urgently required. My [Anderson's] point of departure is that nationality . . . nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind.

Al-Ahsan tends to accept the conceptualization of "nation" and "nationalism" used in the Kohn tradition of scholarship. The result is a somewhat static sense of what a nation is and how it interacts with the Muslim's perception of ummah and the modern Muslim's sense of national identity. The evolution of perceptions of national identities from Jamāl al Dīn to the OIC, for example, might be more persuasively presented in the terminology of Anderson than of Kohn.

Current conceptualizations give support to al-Ahsan's basic point about the fundamental competition between national-identity and ummah-identity, since both can be seen as matters relating to fundamental beliefs and self-perceptions. Viewed as a "primordial" unit, a nation is a natural basis for a political and societal identity. However, "nation" seen as a "cultural artefact" gives recognition that it is a value-laden concept and is likely, in the modern context, to conflict with the fundamental values represented by the *ummatic* identity of believers.

These comments are offered not as a criticism of this thought-provoking and important work, but rather as a suggestion for a next step in the analysis of the "identity crisis in contemporary Muslim society." This book will be of help to all who are interested in modern Muslim history and to non-Muslim scholars of modern political theory.

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## Book Review: *Islamic Political Theory*

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