

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

*By Abdullah al-Ahsan. Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1992/1413 A.H. Paperback. Pp. x + 158.*

The elites of ex-colonial Muslim states faced with the task of constructing a functioning state apparatus and a viable economy resorted to the policy of creating national consciousness among a populace subscribing to Islamic identity. The creation of national consciousness refers to those attitudes of the individual towards self, the group, and the nation, which promote and sustain commitment to - and action in the service of - the state, perceived as a legitimate source of motivation. National consciousness is a response to the 'who am I' question, collectivised to an expanding reference-group boundary that includes a notion of citizenship and of identification with the groups enclosed by the boundaries of the state. Despite the clash of irreconcilable values of nationalism and what Shaheed Raji al-Faruqi calls *ummahism*, the nation-states demanded supreme loyalty from their citizens. This, according to Abdullah al-Ahsan, 'created an identity crisis among Muslims' and his *Ummah or Nation?* is devoted to studying the 'identity crisis' resulting from 'the tension between religious and secular ideas' in contemporary Muslim society (p. 3).

The book is addressed to a scholarly audience with 'a preliminary knowledge of Islamic history' (p. 7). A complete beginner may find some of the pages a little difficult but, on the whole, it reads easily. The narrative reads with the facility that is derived from immersion in the subject and an emotional identification with it. The concept of *ummah* and its essential features are discussed with reference to the Qur'an. Its practicalization is explained by referring to the prophetic phase, the Madinah model, and its salience is described through 'some examples of the emotional attachment of the Muslim masses to the *ummah*' (p. 25).

The review of literature in chapter two is much more interesting and ably executed. It assails Western scholars, like Bernard Lewis, for 'an unjust claim' (p. 35), Nadav Safran, for a 'gross misrepresentation of Kamil's thought' (p. 43), and Rupert Emerson, for an attempt to universalize the development of nationalism even though his definition 'does not cover Arabs of the desert'

(p. 62). It sheds some light on the roots of Muslim-elite nationalism, and sketches the thoughts of some leading figures of Turkey, Egypt and Pakistan, rehabilitating some as having commitment to Islamic identity (Namik Kamal and Mustapha Kamal, among others) and confirming others (Ziya Gokalp, Lutfi al-Sayyid, etc.) as avowedly nationalist. Nevertheless, one discerns confusion in Muslim political thinking: espousing nationalist and secular ideology, yet unable to relinquish Islamic heritage leading to an inevitable crisis of identity. To cite an example, the Turkish nationalists would declare sovereignty to belong 'unconditionally to the nation' yet Mustafa

Kamal would close the constitutional convention by praying for the 'safety of Sultanate and the Khilafat' (p. 75). Muslim elite nationalism is not the product of a secular thrust but a response to European colonialism.

Cost-effective analysis, among others, compelled the colonialists to dismantle their empires. A similar consideration made them hand over power to the crisis-laden elites. Once in power, these elites pursued policies aimed at fostering nationalist consciousness, replacing the supremacy of *ummah* identity. The education policies and constitutional frameworks of Turkey, Egypt and Pakistan amply illustrate this dualism. The resultant crisis is the consequence of the conflict within the citizen's national and *ummah* identity consciousness. This identity crisis is also reflected in the supra-national bodies like the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and its sister institutions. The OIC was a response to the challenge of Arab nationalism, political zionism and the Muslim urge for unity based on the concept of *ummah*. Its aim at reviving the ideal of historic *ummah* is thwarted by the reality of the Muslim world compartmentalized into nation-states with varying ideological persuasions and opposing interests. This and other 'theoretical contradictions have prevented the OIC from making ideal decisions and implementing many resolutions' (p. 113). The problematic nature of the nation-state and the paradoxes of a supra-national body are well researched and well documented. The two chapters present a judicious mixture of diplomatic history and political analysis, such that Professor Khurshid Ahmad was misled to introduce Abdullah al-Ahsan, a historian, as 'a young political scientist'.

The rough survey of the *Ummah or Nation?* sketched above pinpoints the object of Abdullah al-Ahsan's focus, i.e., the elites in Muslim societies. His primary focus, as rightly pointed out by Professor Khurshid Ahmad, 'is on the mind and behaviour of the intellectual and political leadership of the Muslim countries' (p. ix). He ought to have confined himself to discussing the thought and behaviour of this minuscule percentage of the Muslim population. Abdullah al-Ahsan however, bites off much more than he can chew. The self-proclaimed aim of the book is 'to make [the] contemporary Muslim world intelligible', and to study 'identity crises in contemporary Muslim

*society*' (emphasis mine); what he actually studies is the mind and policies of the political elite and extrapolates it to the societal level. The author not only fails to distinguish between the thought of the elite from the feelings and aspirations of the Muslim masses, he also gets entangled in the level of analysis problem and becomes a victim of a variant of the ecological fallacy. To be precise, he commits the individualistic fallacy, also called the composition fallacy, which is present when the units of observation are smaller than the units from which inferences are made. That 'the Muslims *seem* to have become somewhat confused' and that 'not only Turkey, Egypt and Pakistan, but all Muslim nation-states have fallen victim to this crisis of identity' (p. 96) are matters to be probed and proved rather than asserted and inferred. If the identity crisis in contemporary Muslim society is the result of confused elite thinking, then the linkage between the two variables ought to have received energetic scrutiny. Unfortunately, the variables have not been specified, the linkage not examined, and the author has not put in the degree of theoretical homework this fascinating study demands.

Apparently, Abdullah al-Ahsan did not intend a relational analysis. This explains why he did not provide a theoretical framework, which ought to have followed the well-executed literature review chapter. Since he does not raise important theoretical issues, he cannot be evaluated for what he omits to do, howsoever important the undone part of the study may be.

There are other flaws in the book as well. The introduction seems to have been hastily done. It is a patchwork of long quotations and other materials lifted verbatim from subsequent chapters. In other words, there is repetition and overlap in subsequent chapters. References to al-Tabari, al-Razi and al-Zamakhshari in chapter one are incomplete although all other English references have been completely documented. The accusation that 'Bangladesh is committed to secularism as one of its policies' (p.113) is erroneous. Finally, the publisher is guilty of labelling the 'foreword' of Professor Khurshid Ahmad as 'Preface' and of letting one or two printer's devils creep in.

Considered as a study of the identity crisis of the Muslim political elite, Abdullah al-Ahsan has made, as noted by Professor Khurshid Ahmad, 'a valuable contribution towards understanding not only the predicament of this class of people but also the plight of the *ummah* as such' (p.ix). The book also reads well and is well worth reading.

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