

THE ISLAMIST CHALLENGE:
BETWEEN "MODERNIZATION" AND INTIMIDATION

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Most contemporary Muslim nation-states emerged on the world map during the latter half of the 20th century. During the latter half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries, these countries struggled against European Colonialism and in the process they adopted many European ideas such as nationalism, democracy, socialism etc. All these ideas were viewed as part and parcel of the modernization process in the Muslim world. However, independent Muslim nation-states increasingly came under challenge from traditional Islamic ideas. In this paper we shall examine how these ideas have challenged the contemporary nation-state system. We shall also examine how the nation-states have responded to their challenges.

Initially, many observers of nationalist developments in Muslim countries believed that Muslim nation-states would follow the 19th century European pattern to modernize and westernize themselves. Hans Kohn, for example, believed that Muslim countries were going through a secularization process similar to that in Europe. After observing the development of the nationalist idea in Asia, he noted:

A few years back religion was the determining factor in the East. Nationalism is not ousting religion, but more or less rapidly taking a place beside it, frequently fortifying it, beginning to transform and impair it. National symbols are acquiring religious authority and sacramental inviolability. The truth which men will defend with their lives is no longer exclusively religious, on occasion even, it is no longer religious at all, but in increasing measure, national.¹

¹ Hans Kohn, *Nationalism and Imperialism in the Hither East* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1969), 19.

He further observed:

Only twenty-five years ago the Turks, the Arabian, and the Egyptians described themselves first and foremost [as] Mohammedans. They are not yet conscious of ethical designations, or only accorded secondary consideration. Today the Mohammedan is primary a member of his nation or a citizen of his state and afterwards a Mohammedan.²

On the basis of these observations Kohn formed a theory in the study of social change. He said, "Nationalism takes the place of religion as the principle of governing all social and intellectual life."³ Following the footsteps set by Kohn, another widely-quoted scholar on nationalism, Harvard professor Rupert Emerson, theorized that "the rise of nationalism coincides with the decline in the hold of religion." He supports his view by quoting Hans Kohn, saying:

Hans Kohn formulated a universal sociological view which he saw as signifying the transition from medieval to modern forms of organization: religious groupings lost power when they confronted the consciousness of a common nationality and speech.⁴

Following Kohn's "universal sociological theory," Rupert Emerson theorized the growth of nation-states in Asia and Africa saying that:

The nations have come to be accepted as taking priority over claims coming from other sources. Family, tribe, locality, religion, conscience, economic interest and a host of other appeals may at any given time and

² *Ibid.*, 24

³ Hans Kohn, *A History of Nationalism in the East*, 8.

⁴ See Rupert Emerson, *From Empire to Nation: The Rise of Self-Assertion of Asian and African Peoples* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1960), 158, and the corresponding note on page 436.