

Islamic sources of contemporary Arab national unity and identity: The dilemma of modernity

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Research work upon the historical sources of the idea of Arab world unity facilitates the understanding of contemporary realities of that region. It serves the analysis and synthesis of conditions accompanying the emergence, in the first half of the VII century A. D., of this idea, which had preserved its relevance in the process of the later history of the Arab-Islamic world and acquired special significance in modern and present times – within the framework of contemporary political doctrines. The importance of the subject is ascertained – amongst others – by the following considerations: the idea of Arab unity is positively evaluated in the doctrines and programmes of numerous political parties and orientations of the Arab world (Nasserism and various shades of the so-called Arab socialism, the Arab B'ath Socialist Party, Islamic orientations and – naturally – the Arab nationalist movement); the idea of Arab unity involves many highly significant problems of current socio-political realities of particular Arab countries as well as the entire Arab world (questions of democracy or - in other words - political pluralism, equal rights for women and the role of the latter in social life); the constant presence of early Islamic tradition in political thought and practice of contemporary Arab world.

Reflections upon the role of tradition do not merely deal with the natural continuity in the case of many cultures of idea-formation processes, but above all with the specificity of Arab-Islamic civilisation – namely, the current and direct relevance of numerous ideas, deeds, events,...etc., expressed or occurred more than thirteen centuries ago. All that takes place, of course, in changing conditions, but the phenomenon is worthwhile to be registered. Systematic reflections upon the sources of Arabs' national tradition are not new, for they were initiated in early 19th century – the century of Arab enlightenment. Then the idea of Arab unity emerged as an important impetus to the formation of modern national identity. During and after World War I, it transformed into a national liberation movement in connection with the economic, political and military expansion of colonial powers. National feelings of wide circles of Arabs found expression in the form of pride about the past and reflection upon it.

We find proof for this statement in a wide range of political literature and thinkers, dealing with national heritage. The focus of interest had been early Islam and the state formed by Prophet Muhammad and Rightly Guided Caliphs. It was a return to the past as a reaction towards Turkish domination as well as the newly-arising West European challenge. Simultaneously, it was the Arab response to the political doctrines of Western imperial powers, that declared the racial and historical immaturity of nations of the East and the South, their inability to create culture or civilisation, and non justifiability of their aspirations for admission to the family of civilised "nations". The reaction to euro-centrism



was the appearance in Arab political thought of radical directions, seeking in Islam the source of all valuable human thought.

Naturally, other orientations also emerged, which were derived from national and "alien" ideas and ideologies. Most often, the ultimate source of reference was the indigenous global vision: socialism – for example – was not only branded as Arab, but moreover justification for it was found in early Islamic social thought. The basic ideas of Prophet Muhammad's leadership of the Islamic movement that emerged in the first half of the 7th century were the unification of the hitherto dispersed Arab tribes around the new monotheistic faith, together with the rejection of injustice and the emancipation of feeble or lower social strata. The ideas of Islam were directed towards the emancipation and creation of umma (community) as an objective of transformation, with Allah (God) and eternal life in Jannah (Paradise) as the ultimate goal.

The task of creating instruments of transformation was achieved by Muhammad in two stages. During the first stage, the question was how to shape the new human being and new human relationships. This stage lasted basically for the entire Mekkan period (610-622) of the Prophet's activity, but was continued and become developed also into Medina (622-632). During the second stage, the main attention of the movement's leader was concentrated upon establishing the bases of the new state and new community. Within the framework of the latter stage, further continued and accomplished by the Prophet's successors, a united Arab nation became shaped as a new community of faith.

We should bear in mind the political history and dynamics of the Islamic movement, whereas historical events illustrate how the ideas of monotheism and tawhid (unity), in addition to the social principles of Islam have aggravated existing social conflicts in Mecca. Moreover, those ideas verbalised the mentioned conflicts, which earlier had a suppressed character and did not possess a theoretical construction. The line of divisions in the Meccan society proceeded, as a result of the influence of Islam, between the poor and serfs on the one hand and the rich elite on the other, as well as between the youth and tribal seniors.

The monotheistic Islamic movement weakened the positions of influential Quraish clans ruling Mekka and jeopardised their domination upon Arabia. Severe repression inclined Muhammad – firstly – to attempt to gain the support of another centre capable to serve as a base, and – secondly – to abandon persuasive methods in favour of the use of force. Medina became such a base, where after numerous battles Muhammad as the head of this town-state achieved the task of the unification of the Arabs of the Arab Peninsula. The work of Muhammad was continued by the Rightly Guided Caliphs, creating thereby the ideal model of the just and care-taking state. It was postulated then to transform the state into the material base of the umma – understood as an ideological and national category.

Only the state of the entire umma, involved in the task of jihad (i.e. sacred war and action), would be capable to fully achieve the strategy of the liberation and enlightenment of the entire Mankind. Jihad became an act – and at the same time a process – of the permanent readiness of Arabs to fulfil their historical mission. Hence, necessity arose for a warrior consciously fighting for his own cause.

However, the engagement of the individual Arab in the process of comprehensive transformations required to ensure him secure and stable living conditions – for the first time in history, he had a stable source of incomes. Before Islam, war and assaults were often life necessities – i.e. sources of maintenance. At the times of Islam, the situation changed adversely; the regulator of daily life became the ideological state. The strengthening of that state, its expansion and accomplishment of basic objectives secured the preservation of the existing positively-assessed state of affairs and vice versa. The significance of early Islamic tradition for contemporary Arab socio-political thought lies in its creation of a new ideology with a leader of great stature, who was successful in bringing about the formation of Arabs national identity that was further enhanced by granting them a defined role in the civilisational history of Mankind.

Thus, the two unity sources of Islamic heritage were – and still are – the Holy Koran and Prophet's sunna (i.e. statements and deeds). These form the constant canons, while the variable ones (i.e. four schools of sunna interpretation, a fifth school of shi'a, different off-shoots of these schools) have become, in addition to other determinants, the basis for differentiation of the Arab and also the whole Islamic world. Differing attitudes towards tradition (al-turath) and divergent visions of contemporary orientations of Arab world political thought is the function of – among other things – the social situation, level of consciousness and attitudes towards the basic problems of given historical circumstances. It is also related to national, racial, sectarian, etc. affinities. The projection of the past heritage cannot always be identical – each orientation interprets the past, and the present too, in its own way. However, being the projection of the past, historical tradition responds to present-day questions, serves today's needs.

Since the 1970's of this century traditionalism has acquired vast popularity on the political scene of the Islamic world, and continues to show significant dynamism. That consideration explains the rising interest on the international arena in this phenomenon, it also induced the author of the present article to undertake research work upon its interesting and actual aspects. Transformed into a wide political movement, Islamic fundamentalism (understood as radicalism) found in tradition a particular philosophical corner stone, which was conceived as self-defence against dangers forthcoming from the outer world.

On the whole, in the period after World War II, social movements of the investigated area were directed towards rationalist and materialistic philosophies. History had shown, however, that they were unable neither to deliver the awaited solutions of basic development problems nor to interpret reality in a fully convincing manner. Still worse, increased threats were noted on the part of that divided and simultaneously antagonised outside world. The idealisation of the past, the politicisation of faith, the demonic fear of foreign danger, and populism should – from the viewpoint of a person, who attempts to draw in this place a prognosis for the future – be replaced by the selective application of tradition, being in its sources a transformation movement, radically changing the realities of the time.

Taking into consideration the present far-reaching variety of attitudes toward tradition, we better consider a new formula of Arab unity that accepts the real differentiation of the Arab world and covers a new economic conception, according to which technological-

civilisational progress would be something natural in the general opinion. Conclusions about the contemporary validity of the idea of unity should be formulated in a way that takes into consideration the modern needs – namely: the need for pluralist expression of faiths, ideas and convictions, as well as particular group interests; the requirement for a democratic mechanism of expressing the former; the necessity for the enrichment of the Arab League framework and structures, especially the economic infrastructure of a joint venture type; the need for the ultimate foundation of the Arab Community in line with European and world trends.