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Part Five: Shortcomings of Nationalism

Illogical basis of Nationalism

Herbert Luthy says: "Nationalism is a creed based on a handful of dogmas that cannot be accounted for from a scientific and intellectual point of view, and have authenticity only in the minds oft heir followers."[1]

Nationalists have been unable to explain explicitly how their principles can be applied universally, and what are the factors which build up the independent identity of a nation and what is the distinction of a nation which naturally or psychologically sets it apart from other nations, so that these qualities cannot be found in any other nation. The works of the nationalist propounders give us ho indication in this connection, but a show of such disharmonious ideas which are not logically acceptable.

Nationalist theoreticians rely on geographical, lingual, racial, political, economic, cultural and historical factors, and regard the territory, country, blood and history as the factors that build up a nation's separate identity.

Now we will analyze the validity and logic of each of the above factors as a so-called unifying factor and as a yardstick for measuring the independent identity of a society.

Territory and country: These words are rather conventional, than natural. A human being feels at home to be in his town, village and locality as a result of persistent suggestion from outside.

If one is to consider more than the above, why should he regard himself an Egyptian and not an Arab? And if he is a member of the Arab world, why not be an Asiatic? This is something conventional and personal, not logical. Why should a man, born in Ireland, consider his country to be Britain and not Ireland? The frontiers of many countries, especially in Africa, are imaginary demarcations. Nationalists want the people to show attachment to these crooked lines that colonial powers have drawn on the maps of Asia and Africa, and turn this affection into an ideology. They drew these lines, made them look real and forced people on this side of the line to consider themselves as belonging to that country, and those outside that line as foreigners, without giving a logical reason for it. The attachment of a person to

his land is natural, not logical. When it is suggested constantly to a person that a country is his homeland, he comes to believe it, and to consider others as aliens. From a geographical viewpoint, 'homeland' is constantly changing. What Afghanistan is today, was considered Iran yesterday. Why then should an Afghan regard himself an Afghan and not an Iranian? This is only a matter of suggestion.

What other factor other than a common religion, an Iraqi Kurd has in common with an Iraqi Arab? Why should he not consider himself a citizen of Kurdestan instead of Iraq? Nationalists cannot offer a reasonable explanation.

B) Language: The German school of nationalism with Herbert Luthy (1744–1803) and Johan Fichte (1762–1814), particularly, who had been its greatest representatives in the 18th and 19th centuries considers language and history to be the most important factors behind the national identity of a people. They regard language as being especially significant in the creation of a national spirit and identity. Following them are some nationalists of the Islamic world like Namegh Kamal of Turkey and Nadim of Egypt who attach the greatest importance to language as a basis of nationality. But the fact is that the language and common history of a people have not been sufficient in themselves to kindle a national awareness.

The Americans of George Washington's time had the same language and history as those of England, and vet they segregated from Britain and became an independent nation. Switzerland has three different languages in three regions, and yet the feeling of nationality is strong there. India has over fourteen languages, and yet there is no language but English that all Indians may understand. If language is a determining factor of unity and independent national solidarity, why did hot England and North America form a single nation in spite of their common language? Why did not the Latin American countries (except Brazil) which have a common language like Spain, Brazil or Portugal become united?

We do not want to deny the role of a common language in accelerating the process of unity and solidarity, since it is evident that language is a means of direct communication, offering a nation a common literature. What we mean is that language is not the principal factor in shaping nationality, even if it speeds the process. Many nations have become nations in spite of differences in languages (like Switzerland), while there are many nations which are remote from one another in spite of a .common language. Thus language cannot be regarded as a firm basis for nationality. Nasser and other Arab nationalists tried to set up a united Arab nation on the basis of a common language but they failed. The Maronite Christians and Muslims of Lebanon speak the same language but they have been fighting each other for the last six years, and these Christians feel closer to the Europeans than to the Muslims.

Moreover, in every country, we come across several languages, not one. What is called a dialect is in fact a different language. Is it easier for a Persian–speaking individual to understand the Afghani Dari or the Azari of Tabriz? The people of Arabia do not understand even ten percent of the Arabic of Libya. All these facts show that language is a weak factor and basis of nationality and any reasoning opposing this assertion will be illogical and defective.

C) History, culture and civilization: It is true that the history and culture of a people create a feeling of unity and of communal interests, but nationalists forget the fact that in the East, especially in the world of Islam, the unity of history, culture and civilization is based on belief, not on geographical factors. Culture and civilization-wise, post-Islamic Iran is more close to Arab countries and Pakistan, than to the ancient Zoroastrian culture. Similarly, Egypt in its culture and civilization is closer to post-Islamic Iran than was the Pharaonic civilization. Our history and culture are based on ideology and belief. All the Muslims after the rise of Islam have the same history and culture. The past civilization of Iranians, Arabs, Turks, Pakistanis and Indian Muslims is nothing but an Islamic one. Nationalism tries in vain to call this civilization an Iranian or Arab civilization in order to rouse the national sentiments or unearth the decayed bones of pre-Islamic history and culture which has nothing to do with our present culture and civilization. That is why the relics of those civilizations cannot warm the hearts of the people in comparison with Islamic history and civilization, and lead them towards unity and victory.

Nationalists do not only try to revive the memory of the ancient civilization through exaggerations, suppositions, bombasts, self-Praise and fallacious reasonings, but they also resort to a scorn of Islamic history and civilization in order to elevate the racial greatness of Iranians, Arabs or Turks, and, try to ignore Islam altogether. But this is wrong and prejudiced and it defeats the objective. As Dr. Shariati, the martyred teacher, has pointed out: “During the whole course of history, the Iranian race (and the Turks, Arabs and other Muslim nations) has never found a better opportunity than the brilliant Islamic centuries to show its talent and ability.”

Contrary to the nationalists, since the seventh century A.D., Iran, Turkey and the Middle East embraced Islam, so strongly that their history is the same as that of Islam, and their course has been the same with the course of Islamic history, culture and civilization. The greatness and honor of these nations lie in their share in promoting Islam and in their creation of a magnificent Islamic culture and civilization. They are the achievements of these Islamic nations whose past history is not in any way comparable with their religion, and if Islamic countries wish to be proud of their past, they have no basis but Islam.

Moreover, the choice of history as a factor in building up a man's identity is a feeble and illogical one, since the frontiers of countries have not been the same throughout history. Afghanistan was once part of Iran. How then can history be considered as the basis of independent nationality?

D) Race: Most nationalists regard race as a factor which determines nationality. But a careful analysis of it shows the weakness and illogicality of it, like other factors based on prejudice, illusion and superstition.

What is racism? It is a feeling of unity based on kinship. The first line of this attachment is an objective reality, namely the bond with one's father and mother. When this is extended, it reaches one's family, tribe and lastly one's race. But extending it to race, the bond becomes so remote from common ancestors that the racial root cannot be scientifically and logically proved. Has there ever existed in history a thing called the Aryan or Semitic race? Moreover, who can prove that a man is an Aryan? For example half of the Iranians are Sayeds, who are descendants of the Prophet of Islam who was not

himself an Aryan. Can those non-Sayeds claim that during these thousands of years, their blood has not been blended with non-Aryan blood?

Belief in the race and racial unity has no objective and scientific reality; it is only a subjective illusion on which nationalism wishes to base its social-political relations. How comical and illogical!

Thirdly, if we were to adopt blood as a basis, as racism and nationalism do, why should we not have our first ancestors, namely Adam and Eve, as the basis of human generation. In such a case, instead of racism, we may turn to humanism, and instead of nationalism to internationalism. This would be a more logical and convincing idea than the question of race which cannot be proved. Even if the Aryan, Semitic and other races have a historical authenticity, if we do not stop at this point and go far back in history, all these races end In common ancestors. Then why should we not adopt this as a basis?

E) Political organization and economic factors: Some nationalistic schools consider political organization and economic factors as the basis of nationality. From apolitical angle, the Irish form part of Britain, and yet they consider themselves independent. There are many similar cases in the present and past history.

Economics has sometimes acted as a factor of unity like the union of the customs among the various German provinces between 1819 and 1952, which was a prelude to their political union. But such cases are only exceptions to the rule. Economic harmony and collaboration of various groups are not the requisites of national unity.

It is thus clear that the main foundations of nationalism are weak, invalid and illogical, even though they may help occasionally in rousing nationalistic sentiments. They are not determining and fundamental factors behind unity and solidarity. For this reason, French nationalists have been forced to claim that what causes a German, an Englishman and a Frenchman to regard themselves respectively as belonging to Germany, England and France is only and only the individual will or desire. So long as the individual does not freely accept to be a citizen of a particular nation, a common language, race, history or geographical frontiers would be of no avail, and cannot by themselves create a feeling of attachment and national awareness.

Unity on the above basis is a prelude to differences

An effort to create unity on the above basis leads to greater differences and conflicts among human beings. A unity based on geographical boundaries, race or language cannot include all human beings. It is more like walls set up between them, separating them, and intensifying their division. Ideological boundaries can expand without force or imposition with the free acceptance of that school by individuals and nations, and intellectually it is not impossible for it to end with the unity of all mankind. But geographical nationality with lingual and racial differences obviously include all men and so, it can never sustain human unity permanently.

Nationalism creates division among mankind and thus, it cannot lead to universal unity. In such a unit, the questions of minorities and aliens, too, become insoluble. But an Ummah founded on belief is an 'open unit' and it can admit people from every race, color, language and territory who accept that belief. This unity can, therefore, expand and lead to man's universal brotherhood.

In fact the only proper, scientific and logical basis for nationality and unity is belief, ideology and school. Other factors as compared to these are insignificant.

Thus we see that none of the principles that nationalists rely on are universal and logical. But the nationality based on belief which Islam upholds has an intellectual authenticity and is justifiable. Those who have the same ideology possess the same world vision, religious belief, culture, objective and destination, form thus a single Ummah.

So long as patriotism and nationalism exist, the danger of war and human clashes cannot be removed, since national unity will dialectically lead to international dispersion and confrontation. This opposition is not soluble except through force and colonizing others. But a unity based on belief and the acceptance of that belief will remove all differences and one and all will become equal and brothers.

Nationalism defeats its own objectives

Would the country be subjected to division if we use 'religion' as a basis or 'nationality' as a basis?

The aim of nationalism is the creation of unity, but its result is the reverse and it defeats its own objective. The means adopted by nationalism to realize its objectives of creating unity is to kindle sharp sentiments of solidarity on f the basis of race, language or nationality.

But in every country, there exist racial and lingual minorities. When these minorities come to face nationalistic sentiments incited by the propaganda of the majority, they may lose their own independent identity within the majority and react. It is often seen that such propaganda directed at inciting nationalistic sentiments by the majority rouses a regional, racial or lingual nationalism among the minorities and results in the dispersion and disunion of the country.

Logically there is no reason why the majority's nationalism should be considered right and the minority's one wrong. Why should British nationalism be regarded as right and laudable, while the Irish one, as blameworthy and condemnable. If Iraqi Baathists have the right to speak of Arab nationalism all day and night, why shouldn't an Iraqi Kurd have the right to turn to Kurdish nationalism since he is not an Arab after all. If territorial, racial and lingual prejudice is good, then it is good for both sides, and if it is bad, it is so for both. We cannot judge by two different criteria. If the nationalism of America's whites is good, why should that of its blacks be bad?

We see, then, that nationalism has no logical basis, and it defeats its own purpose, and has to establish solidarity by force. It secures what is contrary to its goal, namely division and dispersion.

Contrary to the nationalists' claim, it is not religious beliefs, but nationalistic feelings which check unity and produce division in the country. The result of half a century of the nationalistic propaganda of Reza Khan and Muhammad Reza was rebellion in Kurdestan and Turkeman Sahara.

Nationalism has at no time been able to solve the question of racial, lingual and regional minorities. On the, contrary it has intensified oppositions and made them perpetual.

As the criterion is race, language or territory, and as race and language and the like are not changeable, therefore those not belonging to a certain race or having a certain language are always regarded and live as a minority group and cannot share the sentiments of the majority. Those who through emigration or change of geographical boundaries or invasions become nationals of a country, even after many generations and centuries, feel themselves to be a segregated and alienated group, and others feel the same towards them. Armenians in Turkey, Syria and Iran, and Kurds, Scots, Irish and American negroes are the clearest examples of this.

Nationalism cannot solve the problem of minorities with the criteria of blood and language. But when belief is used as a basis, since it is not a property that can be inherited and something personal, it can perhaps solve the minority question, so that ultimately no minority would probably exist. Anyhow, this is not logically impossible. But the problem of minorities will always exist as a cancerous tumor in nationalistic societies. This is especially more felt in Islamic societies where rousing nationalistic sentiments lead to division.

In Iran, Pakistan and Turkey and most Arab countries, the religious minorities are not more than two to four percent of the population, and even this number can benefit from all the civic and human laws under the system of Islam and feel secure. The way is always open for everyone to become a full member of the Islamic Ummah. But when nationality becomes the basis, the number of racial, lingual and regional minorities increases manifold, so that the total of these minorities in some of these countries actually forms the majority of the population. If nationality is adopted as a basis, the Kurds will turn to the Kurdish nation, and the Turks to the Turkish race. Thus, these countries would undoubtedly move towards division, and only force can keep them united. As the above countries have adopted nationality as a basis, they have so far been entangled with difficulties.

Is it only nationalism that can motivate people's creativity?

Some thinkers like Harold Lasky[2] believe that nationalism should be accepted not as a reality, but as expediency. He writes: "In spite of the shortcomings, defects and contradictions of nationalism, the fanaticism that it creates releases people's energy and creativity."

But Lasky and his likes only take the conditions of the West into consideration where religion lacks sufficient dynamism for rousing public zeal and sentiments. The history of the East and the Islamic world shows that religion has been more effective than nationality in activating and inspiring the Muslim

people, in inciting their initiative and creativity, and rousing intense zeal in the masses.

1. Johann Herder, A Rehabilitation of Nationalism, London, 1962, p.85.
2. Harold J. Lasky: Nationalism and the Future of Civilization, London 1971, p.66.

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