Al-Islam.org
Ahlul Bayt Digital Islamic Library Project
Published on *Al-Islam.org* (https://www.al-islam.org)

Part Three: Definition, Basis and Characteristics of Nationalism

Definition of Nationalism

'Patriotism' is the equivalent of nationalism. In Latin, 'natio' and 'nitus' means 'the place of birth'. Political scientists have given different definitions of nationalism.
Carlton Hayes says:

"A nation is an independent political group with a common world-view and cultural heritage1."

In this definition, a common political organization and cultural unity are considered as the main factors in forming a nation.

Hans Kohn says:
"The co-existence of a special group in a single realm is the factor for forming a nation. Being brought up in a natural and geographical environment creates the greatest unit of tribal solidarity between individuals. The group which on this basis feels a joint interest and expediency, forms a nation2."

Luigo says:

"A nation is a collection of individuals who are joined together by the factor of territory, blood, language, culture or history3."

Salo Baron describes a nation as follows4:

"The word 'nation' is applied to a group of people who live in the same land and are joined together by common political organizations."

Kohn says of the characteristics of nationalism5:

“A deep feeling of attachment to a homeland and absolute loyalty to it, and a sense of sharing its destiny are the basis of nationalism, which is genuine when no other factor checks the loyalty to the homeland.”

The American Encyclopedia defines nationalism as follows:

“Loyalty and attachment to a national unity are more significant than any other attachment in the question of nationalism. Other characteristics of nationalism are pride in the achievements of one's nation, a deep belief in the distinction of one's nation and even its superiority over other nations."[6]

Hayes, too, repeats, the same point and writes:

“Loyalty and attachment to the interior of the group (namely the nation and homeland) are the basis of nationalism[7].”

An analysis of the above definitions clarifies two points:

A) Giving authenticity to territory, blood or language is the basis of nationalism. Instead of basing unity on belief and ideology, nationalism bases it on language, territory and race. Homeland and nationality become the axis of patriotism. In answer to the question as to what is the main factor behind the building of a separate identity, the school of nationalism has this to say:

'What distinguishes a human being from another, is not his belief, but his birth-place, homeland, language and race. Those who are within the four walls of the homeland and nation, belong to it, and those who are outside it, are aliens. National interests and expediency are the criteria of the propriety or impropriety and goodness or badness of everything and the measure for the evaluation of the individual and social conduct'. To the school of nationalism, the factors behind the formation of a nation are material in nature, like geographical frontiers, language, race and political organizations. It is on the basis of these factors that the people have a feeling of sharing a single destiny and a common past.

B) The next basic characteristic of nationalism is that all the loyalty is centered upon the homeland. All other loyalties such as loyalty to God, religion, belief and ideology are subordinated to loyalty to the country and nation. No loyalty should check patriotism, and when religious sentiments come in opposition with patriotic sentiments, the latter must prevail.

This is a principle which no nationalist can ignore. Man lives for his country and offers his life for it, and not for anything else. It is attachment to nationality that gives direction to one's individual and social postures, not attachment to religion and ideology. A human being takes pride in his national achievements and feels dependent on its cultural heritage, not on the history of religion and his faith.

A nationalist believes deeply that nation and country are superior to all others, attributing all the good things to them.

Nationalism and Secularism

According to the above view, nationalism is closely linked with secularism, in view of the necessity of separation between government and religion, and politics from creed. One of the basic principles of nationalism is a rejection of religious bonds and an acceptance of a secularistic order.

One of the main slogans of Egyptian nationalism was:

"Religion is related to God (meaning personal acts of devotion) and homeland is connected with society (i.e. social-political life). Secularism means that religion is something subjective that must be confined to an individual's private and family life, and religious feelings and ideas should not interfere in the socio-politico set-up, be the concern of nationalism only. So the socio-politico roots of religion should be severed from politics.

Nationalism leads directly to secularism. The belief that national unity must be based on a common land, race or language, necessitates that religion be kept apart from politics. Thus, secularism paves the way for the domination of nationalism, since according to this school of thought, religion and nationalism cannot rule at the same time in the same realm.

Secularism is the twin brother of nationalism and it changes the meaning of minorities. In a government founded on religion, the followers of other creeds and schools are regarded as minorities, but with nationalism and secularism, there are only racial, political and regional minorities. Nationalism claims that religious beliefs prevent national unity and religious minorities feel themselves alienated. The only proper basis is geographical, racial or lingual nationality. The main duty of everyone is the patriotic duty, and religious duty is subordinate to it, and confined to personal belief. The patriotic duty of everyone is to sacrifice everything, even religion, for the nation and country and serve and fight for them.

Basis and other characteristics of Nationalism

Nationalism considers sovereignty as a tool to protect the country and its citizens, not one for enforcing a particular ideology and system.

Economy, too, is based on national interest and welfare, not on what is legitimate or illegitimate. Culture, art, poetry and literature are the means for depicting national pride and greatness and creation of solidarity and inspiring racial sentiments.

To nationalism, the strongest factors directing individual and social life, determining intellectual and political postures, are the country and nation. As Ibn-Khaldoon says, the element behind patriotism is nationality.

Some of the other characteristics of nationalism are:
1) Belief that one should defend a compatriot against a foreigner, whether the former is in the right or

not.

2) Eulogizing and almost worship of national personalities and historical heroes of one's country.
3) Revival of past traditions such as ancient idolatry. Neo-nationalism too, in this connection, relies on myths, ancient and dead customs, such as the ceremonies of the last Tuesday night of the year.

Egyptian nationalism, the most eloquent spokesman of which was Taha Hossein, did its utmost to revive the relics of the old pharaonic civilization. Lofti-el-Sayed, the well-known Egyptian nationalist suggested that his compatriots should have a knowledge of the old and brilliant Egyptian civilization in order to ensure the continuity of their history[8]. Likewise, Iranian nationalism was tried to relate the Iranian nation to Cyrus and Darius, not to Muhammad (S).

4) A tendency to distort historical facts to glorify one's country, and to invent stories and create models to show one's nation at its best.

5) Like old Totemism, there are special emblems in nationalism which are given sanctity. The flag, national emblem, and national anthem are considered sacred, for each of which a human being has the duty of self-sacrifice.

Nationalism as a pseudo-religion

Thus, we see that nationalism is a pseudo-religion which is its own god and its own prophet. (Ferdowsi, for example, is regarded as a prophet of Iranian nationalism). This creed has its own totems, idols, models, ceremonies and ethical rules. In fact, Westerners created a creed which they called nationalism on the basis of patriotism, which is rooted in human instincts, after which they exported it to the East.

Nationalism as an advanced tribal system

Westerners lay the foundation of nationalism on the in-group feeling, patriotism and tribal attachment. A critical examination of the school of nationalism would show it to be similar to the tribal system of Totemism.

Unity in the tribal system was founded on a community of blood and land, with a total disregard of right and wrong, and on chastity, honesty and belief. Whoever belonged to the tribe was shown affection, and whoever did not belong to it was considered an alien.

Nationalism too, is similar in this respect. In the tribal system, wars and peace were made for the tribe's sake. A person was proud of his membership in the tribe and very often looked with scorn upon others. The tribe was an organization under whose umbrella, the members felt secure. Nationalism also gives rise to similar sentiments.

Some elements of the tribal system of Totemism, too, have found their way in nationalism. Every tribe

had a totem in which the members felt that a spiritual power protected the tribe. Moreover, while 'homeland' is the great totem of the modern man, nationalism is as illegal and unjustifiable as Totemism. Some groups fight for the lion (emblem of Britain) and blue flag; and some fight for the eagle (German emblem) or for the red flag. While Totemism was the factor behind tribal unity, today the 'country' plays the same role.

1. J. H. Carlton Hayes: Essays on Nationalism, New York, 1926, p. 9.
2. Hans Kohn: The idea of Nationalism: its origin and background, New York, 1944. p. 14,
3. Luigo: Nationalism and Internationalism, New York, 1946, p. 25,.
4. Salo. W. Baron: Modern Nationalism and Religion, p. 31.
5. Hans Kohn: The Idea of Nationalism, New York, 1927, p. 15.
6. Nationalism commotes a loyalty to the group entity, superior to all other loyalties (Encyclopaedia Americana).
7. Carlton Haves: Essays on Nationalism, p. 56.
8. Refer to: “Muqaddamata –Leddera sat-ul-Fekr-ul-siasial-Arabi”, p.101.

Source URL:
https://www.al-islam.org/fr/islam-and-nationalism-ali-mohammed-naqvi/part-three-definition-basis-and-characteristics-nationalism#comment-0