

## **In what ways did the European nation-state pose a threat to the Islamic religio-political order?**

Maxine Rodinson had observed that “the Muslims were a threat to Western Christendom long before they became a problem.”<sup>1</sup> Saladin’s triumph in Jerusalem (1187), the fall of Constantinople (1453) and rapid Western expansion of the Ottoman Empire lend weight to her claim. However, the failure to capture Vienna (1683) marked a power shift between Europe and the Middle East. A revitalised aggressive Europe, determined to make economic, imperial and territorial inroads into the “sick man of Europe” would soon besiege the “scourge of Christendom.”<sup>2</sup> The Treaty of Westphalia (1648) confirmed that this challenge would most likely be offered by a number of independent and secular nation-states. These modern Crusades, or Second Coming, would pose an ideological threat to the Islamic religio-political order. A threat more sinister and dangerous than the strong-arm simplistic military endeavours of the early Crusades.

The European nation-states invasion of the Islamic world employed the Western theories of nationalism, secularism and democracy as their weapons of war. At the heart of these theories lies the man’s desire to determine his own destiny and future. Essentially the theories posit the free will of man against the predestination and determinism offered by religion and God. The emphasis on both the individual and non-religious is anathema to both the ideal and real Islamic religio-political order. This order tends to stress community above the individual and obedience above free will. Consequently, the clash between the two orders threatened to undermine if not destroy the Islamic system. However, the nation-state itself represented a serious threat to the Islamic order.

P.J. Vatikiotis conjectures that the European notion of the nation-state requires the identification of a national-cultural group within a defined territory.<sup>3</sup> This national-cultural group, or nation, may be defined by a sense of identity and loyalty to the territory. The state in this concept refers more to the construction of governmental and political institutions that contribute to supporting the territorial integrity of the nation. The nation-state in European terms is territorially based. This contrasts with the Islamic theory of the nation-state:

A country in Islamic history is a place, and a nation is a people, or the umma, the community determined by religious belief ie the nation of believers.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, Islamic theory postures that the nation centres on the community of believers. The state exists to provide the community the freedom to follow the straight path of God’s law. This is dictated by the Quran and sunna of the Prophet.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, Islam and its ideal order are an ideological not territorial concept. Therefore, the concept of the nation-state appeared antithetical to the Islamic religio-political order by threatening to impose territorial barriers where none had existed before.

Fu’ad Zakariyya cautions that “Islam is what Muslims have made of it in history; it is not some ahistorical system beyond human experience.”<sup>6</sup> In other words the Islamic ideal and ideology must confront the exigencies of reality. It is arguable, for example that *din wa dawla*, the fusion of religion and state, survived the death of the Prophet,

Muhammed. Bill and Springborg highlight that the caliphs (successors to the Prophet) had become subordinate to their political counterparts, the sultans.<sup>7</sup> Islam although ideologically in conflict with such a division buttressed secular state power through the provision of religious legitimacy to these independent rulers. Human experience thus ensured that Islam would not remain monolithic. However, the concepts underpinning the assault of European nation-state on the Islamic religio-political order would require a similar degree of pragmatism and flexibility to counter. The first of these concepts is nationalism.

Nationalism can be viewed as the religion of the European nation-state. The power of its appeal had contributed to the dismantling of the feudal system that operated in Europe for centuries. This system was replaced by nation-states sustained by military muscle and economic clout. Elie Kedourie suggests that nationalism divided Europe into nations that provided the basis for the formation of independent sovereign states.<sup>8</sup>

Nationalism, like the nation-states it supports, is territorial in nature. Vatikiotis theorises that nationalism is also exclusive and implies a certain tribal particularism.<sup>9</sup> In constructing arbitrary geographical boundaries nationalism proceeds to identify the tribe to the exclusion of others. Notably, nationalism within those boundaries is inclusive. That is, nationalism appeals to people regardless of class, religion or ethnic background to identify it as the dominant ideology within society.

In establishing these boundaries nationalism holds that the separation of religion and politics, religion and state must occur for the nation-state to be created. Nationalism then becomes the new religion to which all must pay homage within the state. Such a theory directly challenges or threatens the central role Islam plays in temporal affairs. Islamic doctrine is more universalistic as it comprises the community of the faithful wherever they are located. Preferably, this community, nation or umma is protected by the state. Thus, nationalism challenges the Islamic identity and threatens to undermine the umma by dividing them on ethnic, geographic or any other arbitrary grounds. But what of the conflict between the two doctrines on the battlefield of reality?

The prolonged dominance of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East simultaneously subordinated Islamic ideology whilst denying local and ethnic opportunities to develop nationalism. The provincial administration system provided local rulers a degree of autonomy whilst maintaining centralised authority. Moreover, most Muslims in the empire did not recognise the Ottoman Caliphate as their religious leader. However, the increasing weakness of the Muslim, particularly the Ottoman, empires invited Western interference that in turn fostered the growth of native nationalism. Without the overarching supervision of the Ottomans, Seljuks and Mamluks nationalism and Islam met head on. The two ideologies collided in the aftermath of World War I.

A 'Western' victory in World War I paved the way for the introduction of the mandate system. However, the system did not acknowledge all ethnic groups equally. This gave rise to a variety of political movements with two fundamental aims: to free themselves of European control and create their own national political identity. These movements included the Syrian Social National Party (PPS) and later Aflaq's Ba'athist party and the Nasserites.<sup>10</sup>

The emerging national elites such as Reza Shah (Iran) and Kemal Mustafa Ataturk (Turkey) recognised the power of nationalism and used it to forge new independent states. Ataturk achieved this through the rejection, or at least marginalisation, of the power of Islam. Both leaders identified the need to weaken the ulama to consolidate their own power. This was attempted by employing ethnic nationalism as an alternative to Islam in an effort to transfer the allegiance of the people from Allah to the nation-state.

Once these new states were created the Islamic religio-political order was challenged. The arbitrary division of territory now separated the community or nation of believers. Acceptance of these divisions created the opportunity for the nation-states to play the international game for their own advantage. In practice this meant dealing with the non-Muslim powers instead of dictating to their non-Muslim minorities. Thus, Abd al-‘Aziz of Saudi Arabia gave an undertaking to Britain not to give oil or concessions to foreign powers without British approval in exchange for a formal treaty.

The division also implied that dealings with Muslims elites of neighbouring territories would be based on the norms of European interstate conduct. Such relationships would no longer be of solely local concern and not on the Islamic ideal that all Muslims were members of the one community whose relations were of no concern to non-Muslims. Muslim leaders constantly deal rhetorically with this dichotomy. In 1936, Saudi Arabia and Iraq referred to “the ties of Islamic faith and of racial unity which unite them” and to the desire “of safeguarding the integrity of their territories.”<sup>11</sup> Piscatori claims that every multilateral agreement since that time has clarified that Muslim association must not detract from the individual sovereignty of the states involved.<sup>12</sup>

Ironically, these agreements have not stopped Muslim states invading their Muslim neighbours on a regular basis. Saudi Arabia in the 1930’s extended its territory at the expense of Kuwait, Qatar and Yemen, the Iran-Iraq war and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. As Piscatori points out Islamic pragmatism has resulted in a compromise as “the nation-state is reality and politics is the art of facing reality.”<sup>13</sup> Another element of that reality was secularism.

Secularism has been described as representing the heart of the problem the nation-state poses Islam.<sup>14</sup> One reason for this is that secularism separates the temporal from the spiritual world. Such reasoning contradicts or contrasts to Islam that does not divide the secular from the sacred. Indeed the Islamic social order generated by this indivisibility views God in heaven and man on earth as one realm. Thus, religion and politics, in theory, remain as one. The ulama remains part of the machinery of government and not separate from it.

Meanwhile, the secularist vision relies on reason not faith and is thereby empowered to divide the social order. Once rationalism cut the link between temporal and spiritual orders the establishment of an alternative system was required. Thus, the European nation-state was characterised by a society of citizens not believers. Citizens through civic law and other constraints entered into a contract with the state. These temporal legalities began to supersede divine law. Such a vision poses

considerable problems for the ideal Islamic order which stresses man's ability to interact with his God without these encumbrances or intermediaries. Thus, indicating that such a separation is ideally impossible. However, Islamic reality produced a markedly different outcome.

Firstly, the sultanate gained temporal ascendancy and political supremacy over its religious counterpart, the caliphate. Moreover, Islamic necessity provided the necessary institutions for a viable social and political order. These institutions were supported by a code of conduct for relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, a comprehensive legal system to interpret and administer the law.

Secularism appeared to threaten both Islamic religion and Islamic society. In the first instance the state building process in the Middle East was fashioned from above. State building was a by-product of the gradual decolonisation process in the post war era. Rulers and ruling elite alike aimed to simultaneously state build whilst confirming their own power and control. States and their rulers adopted secularism as the ideology to weld individual and public loyalty to themselves and the state. This required the weakening of the in-service ideology, generally Islam. Muhammad Ali adopted this strategy once Istanbul in the early nineteenth century confirmed his status as a ruler. More contemporary examples include Ataturk and Reza Shah. Both men employed measures that were aimed at reducing the influence of Islam within their societies and as a religion. These measures included the introduction of women into the workplace and abolition of the caliphate.

Islamic or Muslim society in ideal terms is more a community than a hierarchy. However, this does not apply to the non-Muslim element of the community. This element is subordinated both by the Quran and in practice. Secularism fostered or encouraged these minority elements to believe they could separate religion from politics and gain equal rights as citizens.

Moreover, these non-Muslim millets became the conduit for Western influence in the Muslim communities. This was in part due to their position in society as traders; merchants that gave them equal access to East and West. The expansion of contact and trade between east and West prompted the West to extract concessions and advantages for these minorities. This provided the West with an opportunity to cement their imperialist and commercial interests. Nor was the secularist ideology appealing to the non-Muslims only.

Secularism encourages political and religious independence. Bill and Springborg have argued that it was more successful in Europe as the Christian Church provided an organisational model for alternative ideologies to emulate.<sup>15</sup> This is unlike the Islamic version where the ulama is neither as structured nor as separate from government and the state. However, the Shi'i minority groups within the Sunni dominated societies demonstrate both independence and a viable organisational structure. Shi'i doctrine stresses ijihad (interpretation) and independence. Consequently, this need has justified an independent clergy. Secularism inflamed Shi'i desire to gain independence from Sunni dominated governments.

The final prong in the European trident threatening Islam is the concept of democracy. In a Western context, democracy defines that the location of sovereignty lies with the people or the ruled. The people or man becomes the ultimate authority to which government is responsible. The state then ensures this relationship is enforced through the provision of institutions designed to enshrine the people's authority.

This notion is at odds with Islamic political theory. The Quran simply states that believers should "Obey God, obey his Prophet, and obey those in authority over you".<sup>16</sup> Sovereignty is thereby exclusive to God to whom ruler and ruled are responsible. However, in practice the lack of institutions to constrain rulers provided them with the opportunity and power to usurp God's place in the temporal sphere. Consequently, Vatikiotis argues, most Islamic societies were autocratic in nature.<sup>17</sup> Yet even autocracies require legitimation to ensure political survival.

In Muslim states and communities rulers often turned to Islam to legitimate or support their reign. As early as the eleventh century the scholar al-Ghazali argued that the community of the faithful must obey its ruler, as the alternative was chaos. Napoleon also recognised the value of employing Islam as a legitimising ideology. His invasion of Egypt in 1798 was accompanied with the use of Islamic symbolism to encourage the acceptance of foreign rule.<sup>18</sup> However, Islam's insistence on the oneness of the individual with God clashes with outright secular government. This is because the latter denies Islam's relevance to politics whilst simultaneously using Islamic symbolism to legitimise its actions and authority.

Yet the pre-modern emphasis on obedience as the key to authority and governmental legitimacy has become increasingly inadequate and irrelevant in the modern nation state. The continuing penetration of Islamic societies by democratic notions has encouraged the idea that legitimacy is not only more effective when it derives from the political participation of a state's citizens but that it should do so immediately. Even in more conservative states such as Saudi Arabia the call for further political participation continues today.<sup>19</sup>

The growth of the European nation state and its attendant ideologies posed a significant threat to the conservative and authoritarian Islamic regimes that existed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The philosophical forces unleashed on a relatively unprepared Islamic world in the aftermath of World War I witnessed a fundamental questioning of the tenets of the order and their relevance to both reality and *realpolitik*.

No longer was Islam the only valid or even relevant solution in a chaotic and complex world of nation states. Much of the challenge stemmed from the nation states construction of a territorial entity which posited man in control of man, whether it be individual man (secularism) or a group of men (democracy). This reasoning is antithetical to the Islamic faith in man's place within the *umma*, nation or community of believers in God and his *sharia*. In fact arguably no genuine Islamic state can exist until the domination of God over man replaces that of man over man. Indeed the question remains whether any modern state can successfully integrate a nation within both temporal and divine law.

Bill and Springborg believe that there will remain “a continuing disjunction between the theory of Islam and the practice of the nation state.”<sup>20</sup> The last word, however rightfully, goes to the Quran that advises;

Men, We have created you from a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you might get to know one another.<sup>21</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1. **Rodinson, M. in Esposito, J.L. *The Islamic Threat Myth or Reality?* Oxford Uni Press, Oxford, 1992, p.37.**
2. **Esposito, J.L. *The Islamic Threat*, p.p.47-76 provides a detailed examination of the rise and fall of Islamic power in the Middle East.**
3. **Vatikiotis, P.J. *Islam and the State*, Routledge, London, p.37.**
4. **Ibid. p.36.**
5. **Bill, J.A and Springborg, R. *Politics in the Middle East*, Fourth edition, Harper Collins, New York, 1994, p.45.**
6. **Zakkariyya, F. in Bill and Springborg, op.cit., p.78.**
7. **Ibid. p.47.**
8. **Kedourie, E. in Vatikiotis, op.cit., p.35.**
9. **Ibid., p.10.**
10. **Bickerton, I.J and Pearson, M.N. *The Arab-Israeli Conflict A History*, Third Edition, Longman, Melbourne, 1996, pp.34-62 provide a summary of the post World War I period.**
11. **Extract from Treaty in Piscatori, J.P. *Islam in a World of Nation-States*, Cambridge Uni Press, Cambridge, 1986, p.73.**
12. **Loc.cit.**
13. **Piscatori, op.cit., p.81.**
14. **Vatikiotis, op.cit., p.76.**
15. **Bill and Springborg, op.cit., p.51.**
16. **Ibid., p.48.**
17. **Vatikiotis, op.cit., p.23.**
18. **Piscatori, op.cit., p.32.**
19. **Bill and Springborg, op.cit., p.49.**
20. **Ibid., p.47.**
21. ***The Koran* translated by Dawood, N.J. Penguin, Middlesex, 1990, 49.13.**

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