

“Islam larger than Arabism”

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Dina Abdel-Mageed in Cairo

Fahmy Howeidy, a prominent journalist and Islamist thinker, says that Arab unity is important because it is a step towards a greater Islamic unity.

While acknowledging the importance of nationalism, Howeidy argues that the "cloak" of Islam is larger than that of Arabism.

Trained as a lawyer, and having authored several books on Islam in Afghanistan, Iran, Bosnia, China and Senegal, Howeidy has been a leading proponent of the concept that Islam should be the cornerstone of social politics.

He is a member of the International Union for Muslim Scholars.

Al Jazeera: The idea of Arab nationalism was partially introduced by a group of Syrian and Lebanese Christians. Do you think that it was meant to be an alternative to Islamic unity?

Howeidy: The idea of Arab nationalism was introduced at a time when Arabs were fed up with the Turkish presence. I believe that it was not directed against the region's Islamic identity; rather, it came as a response to the adoption of the idea of Turkic nationalism by the Ottomans, which came against the backdrop of a growing discontent with the performance of Ottoman governors, especially in the Levant region.

Thus, the Arab reaction took two forms: at the political level, they revolted against the Ottoman rule, and at the cultural level, they developed the idea of Arab nationalism.

Perhaps some of those who first introduced the idea had anti-Islamic feelings; however, most of them dealt with it as a national issue.

How has Islamism affected the quest for Arab nationalism and unity?

The effect of Islamic movements differs from one Arab country to another, depending on the democratic status. In some countries such as Morocco, Yemen and Lebanon, Islamic movements have more freedom. And the stronger [the] democracy is rooted, the more moderate Islamic movements are.

Moderate Islamic movements attempt to establish good relations and to start a dialogue with nationalists. An example of such a dialogue is the National Islamic Conference in Beirut [in December 2004]. Focusing more on the Arab dimension, moderate Islamic movements believe that Arab unity is the base that should be fixed first.

However, given the fact that moderate Islamists are not part of the political process, their influence is limited.

On the other hand, extremist movements, which totally oppose nationalism, clash not only with nationalists, but also with moderate Islamists.

We are not against the ideals of Arab nationalism; however, we believe that it is only a phase, not the ultimate goal.

It is also important to note that the calls for Arab unity caused a surge in the nationalistic feelings of other ethnic groups, such as the Kurds and the Berbers.

At the same time, there was an intentional marginalisation of Islam – the single common feature among the different ethnic groups. In other words, weakening Islam unleashed nationalist strife.

According to Gamal Hemdan (a prominent Egyptian geographer), the "cloak" of Islam is larger than that of Arabism; it is easier to convince people to rally behind Islam than to convince them to do so behind Arabism. The expanse of Islam in the Arab world is bigger than that of Arabism.

It is possible to create a society with an Islamic cultural orientation that encompasses various religious groups, which has been the case throughout Islamic history. The Islamic civilisation was not established by the hands of Muslims alone - Jews and Christians made significant contributions as well.

I remember [the late Egyptian finance minister] Makram Ebeid's famous statement in 1940: "Religion-wise, I am a Christian, and nation-wise, I am a Muslim." Why do we not adopt the paradigm of 'majority rules, minority rights' like the Americans?

Do you think that Islamism is on the rise because of the disillusionment with Arab nationalism?

I do not think that Arab nationalism has failed because the failure of Egypt or a single experiment does not represent the failure of the whole project. Arab nationalism and unity were put to the test in Egypt, and – to a lesser degree – in Syria and Iraq.

I believe that such experiments failed as a result of tyranny, not as a result of a problem inherent in Arab nationalism. And the same thing applies to Islamism. Ideals are the criteria against which we judge the reality and not the opposite.

However, I believe that Arab nationalism lost its glamour after the death of [the late Egyptian president Gamal] Abdel Nasser and the defeat [in the Arab-Israeli war] of 1967. Nasser's project died with him because it was not established upon democratic ideals. If such a project had been carried by strong parties, institutions and civil society, it would have lasted. But, today, the Nasserites are a small party.

It is totally unrealistic to discuss Arab unity today, given that we are incapable of uniting political forces within individual states. Yet, I still believe that Arab unity is an essential step towards Islamic unity.

Islamic movements have different ideas and world visions. Do you not think that such differences can affect or have affected the unity of Arabs?

Apart from extremists, I do not believe that there are substantial, permanent differences among moderate Islamic movements. It is the same Islam everywhere, but it accommodates the peculiarities of each society. The Justice and Development Party in Turkey, for instance, has taken its name from the Justice and Development Party in Morocco.

Differences do not constitute a problem. There are different factions within the same religion. In Islam, for instance, there are different schools of jurisprudence. What is really important is establishing a truly democratic society.

What about the status of minorities under such an Islamic society?

First, the size of religious minorities in the Arab world is smaller than that of ethnic minorities. The fear of religious persecution and fanaticism is the product of the last 20 years only. During the 1942 elections, for instance, one of [Muslim Brotherhood founder] Hassan al-Banna's representatives was a Copt.

The current fear, which is growing against the backdrop of the rise of Islamism, is the result of the activities of extremists on both sides, external intervention, and fanaticism.

I also believe that some governments, like the Egyptian one, for instance, spread fear among religious minorities on purpose in order to discredit the Islamist option. They tend to convince religious minorities that if Islamists ascend to power, they will be persecuted against and they will be forced to pay the *jizya* [a tax which, according to Islamic law, is imposed on non-Muslims living under Muslim rule] and so on.

Second, minorities have never been a problem. They did not flourish except under Islamic rule. When the Jews, for instance, faced persecution at the hands of the Spaniards after the fall of Andalusia, they fled to the Ottoman empire.

Do you think that there is a contradiction between Arab and Islamic unity?

Ideas should not clash. It is not necessary to categorise everything into wrong and right. There can be two rights.

There are different levels of unity: national, regional, Arab, and Islamic, and we need all of them. Both the Arab and the Islamic strategic depths are important. The nation should have two bases of support: Arab and Islamic.

And by unity here, I do not mean a single ruling system; rather, I mean political, economic, and military coordination.

Today, we are facing challenges that are beyond ideological affiliations, such as the occupation of Palestine, backwardness, and so on. We should all cooperate to achieve our big goals regardless of our ideologies. Today's challenges are much bigger than ideological differences. So, what is the point of breaking the unity of the national front?

I have no problem whatsoever with the secularism that is reconciled with religion. In Turkey, for instance, now secularism is being reconciled with religion.

I believe that the relationship between Islamism and all the other intellectual and political trends depends on the future of democracy. The success of such a relationship can only be achieved in a democratic environment.

Which is more feasible: Arab or Islamic unity?

I hope for Islamic unity, but, there is a big difference between dreams and political realities. I do not think that either of them is feasible today.

What is really important is creating a truly democratic society in which people can coexist despite their differences.