Sectarianism and National Identity

By: Raouf Ebeid – PI Online
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The least understood and appreciated aspect of the problems confronting the Arab-Islamic countries is the lack of a national identities. Because most countries in the Middle East lack a sense of common national character, they rely on the myth of Pan-Arabism or the religious notion of an Islamic *Ummah* [pan-Islamism.] In reality, the trend in the region is toward a far more sectarian or tribal identities, which comes at the expense of national identity.

The defeat in the 1967 war signaled the end of Nasser's short-lived dream of a great, cohesive Arab nation. Although some Middle Eastern countries like Egypt and Syria continued to carry the word "Arab" in their name, it is Islam – not Arab nationalism – that has become the defining characteristic of most of these states. As a perfect example, many leaders in the Middle East advocate the preservation of the Arab-Islamic identity of Iraq rather than its Iraqi identity.

At first blush, Islam may appear to be a sufficient foundation for a regional or national identity, but recent inter-Arab and Inter-Islamic confrontations have proven otherwise. Most analysts have attributed the lack of national identity to the fact that there has been no natural evolution of nations in the Middle East and thus no natural evolution of national identity. The imposition of arbitrary national boundaries by colonialist rulers and autocratic regimes have failed to instill a sense of patriotism and belonging from the top down. Such a phenomenon must, as in most countries in the world, occur organically, from the bottom up, through history and tradition.

Of late, it has become fashionable for political pundits to blame sectarianism for all the ills in the Middle East. The Western world is another frequently cited source of the problem – more specifically the specter of a Western fermented "*fitna*[1]". *Burhan Ghalioun*[2] writing in *Al-Jazeera*[3] traces the Arab world's negative perception of sectarianism to two separate trends. The first attributes the problem to the "divide and rule" policies of the departed colonialist powers. A result of this assumption, according to *Ghalioun,* is the refusal to accept that the problem is the sectarianism inherent in present Arab societies and therefore requires an internal cure. It is more convenient, for example, to blame the West, particularly the United States, for what is perceived as the fractionalization of Iraq with the intention of stripping the country of its Arab identity. The second contributing factor, according to *Ghalioun*, emanates from religious leaders who continuously discredit and stigmatize other sects. These religious personalities look with suspicion upon any attempt to foster patriotism because they consider it a threat to their own power. A perfect example is the refusal of the Muslim Brotherhood to participate in secular Egyptian protests that were about economics rather than religion. [*See* PI 551]

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[1] Translated as schism, strife or secession, the word, as understood by the Muslim population, implies division within Islam leading to anarchy and civil war.

[2] Burhan Ghalioun (French-Syrian) is presently the Director of the *Centre d'Etudes Arabes et de l'Orient Contemporain* (CEAOC) in Paris and a Professor of Political Sociology at the Sorbonne.

[3] http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/B67015F9-0848-4E67-9DB3-9F7FC87B3E79.htm - April 16th, 2008

Ghalioun makes the interesting point that the fragility of national identity in Arab societies has led to dual behavior. While publicly rejecting sectarianism, they fully practice it. The result, according to *Ghalioun,* is a fake national identity, which is defended hypocritically and adhered to only in theory. He states that behind this sham nationalism exists a total disregard for any social responsibility towards others. At the same time, the sectarian conflicts continue to destroy any nascent nationalistic aspiration based on some common ground other than religious affiliation. *Ghalioun* is skeptical of any federalist solution in which there is power sharing among the many sects, but he concedes that national aspirations that could lead to a solid identity and a functioning society are lacking. The main reason, according to him, is the diminishing sense of justice in many of the Arab societies.

Ghalioun's point is well taken. As the populations of Arab countries search for a sense of belonging, they have alternated between the trans-national level (Pan-Arabism and Pan-Islamism) and the micro level (sects and tribes). Thus far, unfortunately, in moving from one level to the other the populace has dismissed the most common source of cohesiveness – national identity.

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