Nationalism: An Erroneous Concept

For most of this century, the Muslim world continues to hobble along a treacherous path that has been constructed for them by others. The destination for this course is one that they have led us to believe is beneficial and worthy of striving for. The fuel for this journey is extracted from the false concepts that Imperialist implanted in the Muslim World.

Origins of Nationalism

One of these poisonous concepts that stigmatises the Prophet's (saws) Ummah is Nationalism. It is a dangerous concept that has become the emotional basis for the state of the Ummah today and one, which visibly fortifies the division among those who profess to believe in the same ideology. Furthermore, the Muslims identify themselves as Turkish, Arab, African and Pakistani. If this is not enough, Muslims are further sub-divided within each country or continent. For example, in Pakistan people are classed as Punjabis, Sindhis, Balauchis and Pathans. This fragmentation continues to gain momentum amongst the Muslims.

The Muslim Ummah was never confronted with such a dilemma in the past during Islamic rule. They never suffered from disunity, widespread oppression, stagnation in science and technology and certainly not from the internal conflicts that we have witnessed this century like the Iran-Iraq war. So what has gone wrong with the Muslims this century? Why are there so many feuds between them and why are they seen to be fighting each other? What has caused their weakness and how will they ever recover from the present stagnation?

There are many factors that contributed to the present state of affairs, but some of the main ones are the abandonment of the Arabic language as the language of understanding Islam correctly and performing Ijtihad, the absorption of foreign cultures and thus the abandonment of Islamic beliefs, the gradual loss of central authority over some of the provinces, and the rise of Nationalism since the 19th Century.

Nationalism did not arise in the Muslim world naturally, nor did it come about in response to any hardships faced by the people, nor due to the frustration they felt when Europe started to dominate the world after the industrial revolution. Rather, nationalism was implanted in the minds of the Muslims through a well thought out scheme by the European powers, after their failure to destroy the Islamic State by force.

Nationalism Defined

The concept of nationalism is very large and cannot be understood without studying the way humans identify and relate to each other in society. This study will enable a differentiation to be made between various forms of grouping and nationalism. Human beings can identify or group together on the basis of:
Patriotism arises when people come together due to the love of a country. It is a form of unity that comes about when that particular country is under external threat e.g. military conflicts with other nations. The effect of this bond results in people of different backgrounds setting their differences aside to form a common front in support of the government. The concept of patriotism is often confused with nationalism. The inherent weakness of patriotism, as a basis of uniting people, is that it unites people temporarily and only then if an external threat is looming in the horizon. Hence, patriotism has no role to play during peacetime, and it cannot, therefore, be a basis of a permanent unity.

Nationalism is a bond between people that is based upon family, clan or tribal ties. Nationalism arises among people when the predominant thought they carry is that of achieving domination. It starts from the family, where one member asserts his authority to achieve leadership in the affair of the family. Once this is achieved, the individual extends his leadership to the wider family. In this way, the families would also try to achieve leadership in the community they reside in. The next stage is that of tribes competing with each other, all trying to dominate others in order to enjoy the privileges and the prestige that comes with this authority. This breeds arrogance and ignorance along with extreme pride.

Nationalism cannot unite the people because it is based on quest for leadership. This quest for leadership creates a power struggle between the people and this leads to conflicts among various strata of society. Another drawback of nationalism is that it gives a rise to racism. This is expected if people are allowed to compete with each other on the basis of their race. Some whites, for example, may see themselves as superior to the blacks, or vice-versa, leading to polarisation of the races and a divided society.

The spiritual bond among non-Muslims is a grouping of people based on their 'religious belief' which is not a comprehensive belief covering every aspect of life. An example of a spiritual bond is when people identify with each other on the basis of being a Christian, a Hindu or a Jew. Islam is not classed among these as it is a Deen rather than a religion. The term Deen comprehensively takes on the meaning as "A complete way of life". This spiritual bond does not unite people on issues other than matters of belief and worships, hence it is limited and cannot be the basis of any complete unity.

The Complete Lasting Bond

In Islam, love and hate is only for the sake of Allah (swt). Our Emaan (faith) and Taqwa form this basis. Allah says:

"The believers, men and women, are Awliya' (helpers, supporters, friends, protectors) of one another, they enjoin (on the people) good, and forbid evil, they perform Prayers and give the Zakat, and obey Allah and His Messenger. Allah will have his Mercy on them. Surely Allah is All-Mighty,
All-Wise”. [Qur’an 9:71]

From this verse we can note that Islam is not merely a ritual belief but rather one also encompassing the actions and deeds reflected upon by faith.

So the final way in which people can group together is on the basis of Aqeedah or faith. It is Islam that provides the set of rules, regulations, and instructions according to which man lives and which he refers to in order to solve his problems. This bond only takes into account the Aqeedah and nothing but that belief. Colour, race and gender are irrelevant. This is the type of bond found within Islam.

Therefore bonding through the Aqeedah and Emaan is a permanent bond because it arises from a conviction pertaining to the meaning of life. The creed is never influenced by colour, race, language, love of a land or local issues. Hence, it is the true basis for permanent unity. Islam calls for this type of unity.

Islam came and eradicated nationalism. The nationalistic structure of the pagan Arabian society, which existed for centuries, was diminished by its arrival. Islam invited people to believe in one God, Allah (swt), and to follow His commands. For Allah (swt) says,

"And they have been commanded no more than this: to worship Allah, offering Him sincere devotion, being true (in faith); to establish regular prayer and to practise Zakat; and this is the deen right and straight." [Qur'an 98: 5]

It asked for loyalty to the deen of Allah (swt) rather than to the tribes. Ties between the Muslims were therefore based upon the Aqeedah of Islam. All Muslims were treated exactly the same, irrespective of their family background, and anyone who declared the Shahada "La ilaha illa Allah Muhammad Rasul Allah" became part of the Muslim Ummah.

The Prohibition of Nationalism

Nationalism is a concept alien to Islam because it calls for unity based on family and tribalistic ties, whereas Islam binds people together on the Aqeedah and Emaan. That is, belief in Allah (swt) and His Messenger (saws).

Therefore grouping together on tribalistic lines is clearly forbidden. It is narrated by Abu Dawud that the Messenger of Allah (saws) said, "He is not one of us who calls for 'asabiyyah, (nationalism) or who fights for 'asabiyyah or who dies for 'asabiyyah." And in another hadith, the Messenger of Allah (saws) referring to nationalism, racism, and patriotism said "Leave it, it is rotten". [Muslim and Bukhari]

There are many examples in the Seerah where the Me

The messenger of Allah (saws) had rebuked those who upheld nationalism. On one occasion a party of Jews conspired to bring about disunity in the ranks of the Muslims after seeing the Aus and Khazraj within Islam. A youth from amongst them was sent to incite remembrance of the battle of Bu’ath where the Aus had been victorious over the Khazraj, and he recited poetry to bring about
division between them. As a result there was a call to arms. When the news reached the Messenger of Allah (saws), He (saws) said, 'O Muslims, remember Allah, remember Allah. Will you act as pagans while I am present with you after Allah has guided you to Islam, and honoured you thereby and made a clean break with paganism; delivered you thereby from disbelief; made you friends thereby?' When they heard this they wept, and embraced each other. This incident clearly highlights how the messenger of Allah (saws) rebuked any forms of tribalism and nationalism. Allah (swt) then revealed the verses,

"O you who believe! Fear Allah as He should be feared and die not except in a state of Islam. And hold fast together all of you to the rope of Allah, and be not divided among yourselves; and remember with gratitude Allah's favours on you; for you were enemies and He joined your hearts in love, so that by His Grace you became brothers; and you were on the brink of the pit of fire, and He saved you from it. Thus Allah makes His signs clear to you that you may be guided." [Qur'an 3: 102-103]

The incidents above demonstrate that tribal ties have no place in Islam. Muslims are commanded to stick together and not to disassociate themselves from each other just because they come from different tribes or backgrounds.

The Messenger of Allah (saws) also said, "The Muslims are like a body, if one part of the body hurts, rest of the body will also suffer" [Muslim] meaning that the Muslims, whether they are of Chinese, African, or Arabian or European origin, are one Ummah and they cannot be separated from each other. Furthermore, Allah (swt) says: "The faithful are but brothers..." [Qur'an 49: 10]. No nationalistic ties should ever break their unity. That is the beauty of Islam.

Now the speech of Allah (swt) addressed to the Messenger (saws) is also a speech to his Ummah, unless specific evidence comes to restrict this. In this case, there is no such restriction, so it becomes obligatory for the Muslims to rule according to Islamic teachings. And ruling according to Islam leaves no room for nationalistic constitutions whatsoever because what is applied (and what forms the criteria for judgement) is the Book of Allah (swt) and the Sunnah of the Messenger (saws). Allah (swt) says,

"It is not for a believer (male or female) that when Allah and His Messenger have decided a matter that they should have any choice in the matter." [Qur'an 33: 36]

Hence since Islam has prohibited nationalism, it becomes a duty of every Muslim, in the present situation, to work towards tearing down the nationalistic boundaries that are artificially created in Muslim lands, and to remove any obstacles which allow its propagation. And those who still uphold nationalism, remember what Allah (swt) says, "

Those who oppose Allah's order have to be warned that a calamity may strike them or a painful doom may fall upon them." [Qur'an 24: 63]

I ask Allah (swt) to guide us all and make our hearts pure.