

## **Pan-Arabism loses ground in religious divide**

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Secularism in the Middle East is dying, if not already dead. One of the by-products of the Arab Spring, intended or not, has been an increasing tendency to downplay a sense of inclusive nationalism in favour of a much narrower set of criteria in defining interests.

In the Arab world, religious identity is fast becoming the most important and yet most divisive question for societies.

Sectarianism is now a more defining characteristic than ethnicity or tribal affiliation, and each of them is more powerful than nationality. This is a dangerous development, given that economic drivers dividing societies into "them" and "us" can be overcome by sound policy prescriptions and good governance.

Religious divides are much more entrenched, and defy easy ways of overcoming them. In the Middle East such divides are the result of historical political anomalies as well as the struggle for regional influence by states whose religious identity has always been at their core.

There are tensions involving claims of persecution of Coptic Christians in Egypt by the majority Sunni Muslim population, disproportionate parliamentary representation by the Christian minority in Lebanon, a centralisation of Shia power in Iraq at the expense of the previously dominant Sunnis and the unwillingness by the Sunni monarchy to undertake any meaningful political reforms that would empower the Shia majority in Bahrain.

The tendency to identify oneself, or to be identified by fellow countrymen by religion is one of the reasons why a spirit of nationalism has found shallow roots in the contemporary Middle East.

Apportioning political power along confessional lines and reserving seats for religious minorities may on the surface appeal as a means of guaranteeing minority interests, but it does little for the fostering of secular nationalism. In Muslim majority states it conjures up notions of the dhimmi, a protected status for religious minorities in lands conquered during the early Islamic period. But this status never guaranteed equality, merely protection.

This mindset is reflected in Iran's parliament, where seats are reserved for Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians. When I spoke to people in the region about future governance models for a post-Assad Syria there was a near universal belief that minorities' rights could be met by reserving seats for them in parliament.

At the same time there was no acknowledgment that, by making their political representation contingent on their religious identity they were relegating national identity to a secondary consideration. It was felt that political representation that merely reflected geographic localities or political orientation would disadvantage religious minorities as they could not garner sufficient support to enter parliament. Yet truly modern societies can never make political participation and representation contingent on religion.

Today, supporters of secularism and liberalism who see a society built on rights and freedoms that are enshrined in constitutional rule and protected by the state regardless of, rather than dependent on, creed are being sidelined by those who prioritise ordering society above addressing the economy, or by making sure that religious identity is central to acceptance or the exercise of authority.

The political opposition to President Bashar al-Assad's minority regime was headed by the Sunni cleric and former imam of the Umayyad mosque in Damascus, Moaz al-Khatib. He was replaced by George Sabra, who is commonly referred to as the Christian George Sabra.

Neither person's nationalist credentials, in particular Sabra's secular leftist background are important. Khatib's religious credentials were seen as an effective counter against the powerful armed Islamist groups among the opposition, while Sabra's Christianity is meant to appeal to religious minorities inside Syria and counter Western claims that the opposition is not sufficiently religiously diverse. Hezbollah, the muscular arm of long-repressed Shi'ism, has entered the fray in Syria, ostensibly to protect itself from the takfiris among the Syrian opposition, but in reality to support its own and Iran's strategic interests, which the continued presence of an Alawite-dominated Syria represents.

It appears that the days of the Arab secularists are gone. There is no longer a contest of ideas in the Arab world, only a contest about whom God does and doesn't favour. Today the dominant narrative is one of religion, which in turn is largely a reprisal of the centuries-old contest between the two main branches of Islam.

Religion masks a rather more prosaic battle for political influence between Shia Iran and Sunni states led by Saudi Arabia. Arab nationalism that sought to unite a people based on their ethnic and geographic identity rather than their religion, and leftist groups that sought a fairer distribution of state resources have had their day.

To understand how religion has robbed the region of its unifying political themes one needs to look no further than the Palestinian nationalist movement, a secular grouping that ignored religious affiliation in its early days.

Nowadays, the Muslim Brotherhood that inspired Hamas's Islamist persuasion, and Iran that nurtured its religious character have fatally riven an already divided Palestine. The despair of the original Palestinian nationalists at what religion has done to Arab inclusivity was summed up by the famous Palestinian poet and activist Mahmoud Darwish near the end of his life when he famously noted of Hamas's triumph in Gaza that ``We have woken from a coma to see a monocoloured flag (of Hamas) do away with the four-colour flag (of Palestine)".

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