The 'Islamic State' and Arab nationalist dream

By Farish Noor

IMPLICATIONS: *What happens when a group undermines the logic and purpose of nation-building?*

FOR more than a century, Arabs have suffered the stigma of Orientalist depictions of themselves, their societies and their culture as backward and savage. As Edward Said had noted in his work of 1978, a generation of Orientalist scholars had invented, and later reproduced and perpetuated, the myth of Arab backwardness as a thin excuse for Western intervention in Arab affairs, and the colonisation of the Arab people.

By the mid-1950s, however, Arab nationalism became a force that posed a counter-hegemonic challenge to the dominance of the Western model, and Arab leaders like Gammel Nasser attempted to build a new Arab world on the basis of consensus and cooperation between Arab nation-states. The dream of Pan-Arabism was premised on the idea that Arab states could, and should, unite, pool their collective human energies and natural resources to develop themselves on their own terms with the goal of creating a different kind of non-Western modernity that would be culturally authentic and truly rational and modern at the same time. These hopes were sadly dashed by a string of military defeats, from the Suez crisis to the wars with Israel, and, in their wake, Arab unity became a pipe dream and different Arab states went along their separate paths.

Over the next half-a-century, the Arab world, despite its enormous resources and wealth, has been struggling with the challenge of modernity, and trying to maintain a sense of noble purpose and stature in global affairs; but to no avail. The rise of so many authoritarian regimes in the Arab states, coupled with their problematic love-hate relationship with the West, had created vast pools of discontent among the urban poor, the hopeless youth and the cultural-religious minorities in their midst. The net result has been a string of crises of legitimacy that almost every Arab state has had to deal with since then, plus the rise of radical politics as the most common form of oppositional resistance.

This has been the longer historical backdrop to the current goings-on in the Arab world, where, one by one, Arab regimes are tottering before the advance of the radical group Isil (now known as Islamic State). The rapid rise and spread of this movement is not due to faith or conviction or even luck, but rather the very real failures of Arab states to create workable representative democracies. In Iraq, for instance, IS' rise can be read as an index to the failure of the Nouri al-Maliki government to bring into the fold thousands of Sunni Iraqis who felt themselves sidelined and marginalised by his divisive communitarian policies, and who no longer even believe in the state. The same can be said of Syria, where the rank-and-file of IS is made up of many people who felt themselves the subjects of state persecution and policies of marginalisation.

Today, however, as IS spreads across the Arab world, its clarion call is that of the supra-state, a Caliphate that transcends the borders of the nation-state. This is not merely a call for a return to some reconstructed, imagined past, but also an indictment of the failure of nation-building in those countries, where marginalised groups no longer feel at home and no longer regard citizenship as something of value.

True, the violence of IS is excessive and even barbaric by the standards of many, but it is also true that its members feel they have nothing to lose as they had nothing to gain in the first place. Arab nationalism did not create the happy land of equality that they had been promised, and for communities such as the Sunnis of Iraq, the Iraqi state had been turned into a foreign land for them,

thanks to the divisions created by former leader Maliki. Is it any wonder that the state is no longer the political goal for the followers of IS? But the most worrying thing about the movement is that its appeal is spreading across the Arab world, signalling a loss of faith among many in the modern nation-state and the goal of Arab nationalism.

Those who claim that IS may be part of a vast arcane conspiracy to destroy the image of Islam and Muslims may not be able to prove their theory, but they may also have a point: For if a group like this can indeed undermine every state in the Arab world today and undermine the logic and purpose of nation-building, then it would be the first movement to effectively erase the legacy of Arab nationalism that began from the 1950s to the present. That would spell the end of the state as we know it in the Arab world, and would suggest that the Arabs had merely evolved from one form of tribalism to another, without ever experiencing the process of Modernity. What a sad fate for an entire generation of Arab leaders and intellectuals, and a betrayal of the Arab dream of liberation.

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