

# Tribalism, Ethnicity and Religion

Abdul-Rahman Al-Salimi

*O mankind! Lo! We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another. Lo! The noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct. Lo! Allah is Knower, Aware.(1)*

Nomadism has played a major role in the life of Arabs and Muslims throughout history. It was a way of life that was widely spread between two major nations that significantly contributed to the historical Islamic experience: the Arabs and the Turks. Some researchers discussed this experience in their studies, talking about the rise and collapse of civilisations, and some talked about its spread and civilisational transformation in the classical history of nations. Those who dealt

with this topic in modern times took into consideration, while talking about nomads and urbanites, Qur'anic references, Ibn Khaldun's fanaticism theory and the studies, travels and comments of Western geographers and anthropologists concerning Arab countries and Muslims over the last two centuries.

In fact, Qur'anic references to nomads or urbanities dealt with the attitudes of many groups towards the Prophet Mohammad (PBUH), faith, Islam and the Holy Qur'an. The references condemned nomadic life patterns but somehow also appeared to condemn the nomadic mentality, which systematically refused to be part of a group, society or state. Instead, this mentality inclines to conflict and favours a life of poverty and difficulty rather than the comfort of family and town or city. This is why the Qur'an calls for *hegira* (migration) because the meaning of the singular form of the word (*hagara*) in the Saba'ai Arabic dictionary, which is the Arabic language of the south pre Islam, is 'settlement

in an urban place'. Accordingly, the neighbourhood, cooperation and good relationships prevail among those people living together and prove stronger than tribal relationships. Thus, the idea of loyalty to tribal relationships will be replaced by loyalty to the one united diverse community (a group of true believers) who believe in the same principle. Therefore, the purpose of gathering in one town or city was not only for defensive reasons, which were important during the first stages of Islam, but also for establishing new patterns of life.

However, the first year of the Prophet's arrival in Yathrib (known later as Al-Madinah) shows the mechanisms applied for the transfer to city life. *Hegira* means settlement but it does not mean abandoning inherited Arabian structure. There is a difference between nomadism and tribalism.

In the era of Al-Madinah, the Prophet (PBUH) established a community of true

believers that represented a community made up of the people of Yathrib and migrants. This community took care, through its leaders and dignitaries, of the responsibility of relationships with other nomadic and urban groups. However, the tribal relationship group maintained its role of protecting rights and solidarity. For example, *Banu Auf* (sons of Auf) vied in supporting with one another, and the other tribes of *Aws* and *Khazraj* did likewise. Thus, the Islamic experience dealt with that reality but it gave a different example of a gathering that was unique in its unity and supreme authority. The new gathering adopted the positive values of intimate tribal relationships, the care of relatives and sharing responsibilities, and then it replaced the tribal spirit with faith in the context of the political and new Madinah groups.

In its first comparison of negatives and positives between Islam and nomadism, the Holy Qur'an classified all patterns of human life under two rules: competition and

acquaintance. The competition resulting from rivalry and desires of dominance is totally negative because it encourages competitors, winners and losers, even if they belong to different groups, to come together to defend themselves and achieve their goals.

*For had it not been for Allah's repelling some men by means of others, cloisters and churches and oratories and mosques, wherein the name of Allah is oft mentioned, would assuredly have been pulled down(2).*

Competition in this sense is human nature that finally leads to balance after the failure of the challenger in achieving dominance or desired goals. Undoubtedly, this kind of competition or gathering for attacking or defending is based on a party spirit from both sides and is a tribal spirit, or in modern terms ethnicity.

Some Western sociologists and anthropologists wanted to differentiate between the Western assembly and its Arab Islamic counterpart. They stated that the Western assembly is unionist and consolidative while the other is separatist and sporadic. Thus, according to this theory, the former succeeds in establishing and living in states while the latter fails in establishing states of equality because of its separatist nature and because it needs stability and continuity for one of two reasons: dictatorial authority or to maintain fragile peace by negotiation, cooperation and continuous balance. In fact, mankind's assembly is diverse but without occasional consolidative and separatist units, here and there and although there are tribal conflicts between Arabs or Africans, there are ethnic conflicts between Europeans that lead to world wars.

The Holy Qur'an provides the solution for ethnic and tribal spirit conflicts and its recognition, which means exchanged

recognition of specifics and interests. Thus, differences are inherited in human nature and, therefore, recognition and familiarity are the means to rise and progress. Although differences and diversity imply rivalry, scientific, political and economic developments impose another view, which is the recognition to avoid partial and comprehensive wars for the good of mankind. Thus, this view is the opposite of superiority, dominance and arrogance.

The first logic, the logic of dominance, implies the existence of masculine and feminine differences, and differences between nations and tribes, which lead to disputes, wars and instability. On the other hand, the second logic conforms to the necessity of human development and the balance and culture of countries. It is the logic of recognition based on logical dialogue that recognizes peculiarities and differences, which utilizes differences and does not try to reject them. We see incomplete experiences in classic Islamic

communities, which are distinguished by their ethnic and religious diversity eg. Al-Andalus. Moreover, the experience of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights can be used as a foundation to replace rivalry and conflict through dialogue and recognition.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **References:**

- 1) Pickthal's translation of the Holy Qur'an.
- 2) Surat Al Haj verse no. 44, Pickthal's translation of the Holy Qur'an.