THE *UMMAH* (NATION), AS SEEN FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF GEOGRAPHICAL HYPOTHESIS AND POLITICAL REALITY

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The current Arab revolutions and upheavals have given the notion of *Ummah* (Nation) a new lease of life as it seeks to re-establish itself on the world's politico-cultural map in the wake of an unprecedented identity crisis that has lasted for over half a century. By this I do not mean that it has not existed as a real and active concept over recent decades. Indeed, it has featured constantly in speeches and public discourse, though it has always done so in a somewhat "flabby" form – i.e. as an expression of intention or wishful thinking rather than as a serious strategic approach.

That is to say, it has failed to reflect reality or the situation in which its peoples actually live and feel and have their being.

At the time of the Ottoman Empire the term *Ummah* was an expression of identity with that Empire and allegiance to its authority. Contrary to what some people may believe, it was a concept that was both

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political and religious, since the Empire encompassed a multitude of different faiths and ethnicities while remaining a Sunni, Islamic state. Some of its subjects gave their allegiance to it on religious grounds, while others recognized its authority because it served their interests and – when it was at the height of its powers – offered its non-Muslim residents a wide range of privileges. (This was before its "Age of Crisis" which had negative repercussions for its minorities and caused a sea-change in relations between the centre and the fringes; after than, *Ummah* acquired a more strongly religious flavour.)

The dual politico-religious character of the *Ummah* was the dominant feature of the Empire's era of prosperity. This was despite the fact that there were as many Christians as Muslims in the Caliphate's capital during the 18th century, while administrative positions in the state were awarded primarily on the basis of loyalty to the ruling authority. "Ottoman secularism" – if such a term is acceptable – was different from the secularism that appeared in Europe during the same period, though the two shared one basic principle in common; both drew a clear distinction between religious and civil competence. While recognizing that religious knowledge and integrity were necessary qualifications for religious positions, positions in the state were governed by a different set of criteria in which – while they might be acceptable as options – religious considerations were not seen as mandatory.

It was here that the difference between the two "secularisms" was most manifest. The European version evolved to a point where the concept of Nation (the European equivalent of an *Ummah*) lost all its religious connotations. This was caused by a deep schism at the very heart of Christianity which was incapable of resolution through traditional means; theological debate between the traditionalists and reformers was unable to restore the unity of the Church and excommunication orders from the Head of the Church failed to prevent the princes and feudal lords from supporting reformist ideas. Consequently the West experienced two centuries of bloody religious wars. Thousands died and there was growing political pressure for a separation between the religious and civil spheres – i.e. between faith and politics – with the result that the concept of a Nation

became a purely political one with allegiance to the head of state taking precedence over all other forms of allegiance.

The nation-state aimed to free itself from all forms of outside "trusteeship" so that sovereignty could be vested in the people. This now "rejected trusteeship" included the control exercised by the Head of the Church, not only in his capacity as the power that bestowed legitimacy upon the governing authority, but also with respect to his practice of interfering in the political process through the powerful and highly inflated religious establishment of that time. The Church was responsible for education, the civil registry and the Nation's spiritual and moral guidance, while the cultural scene was also overwhelmingly religious.

Accordingly, secularism was something that grew out of differences over the interpretation of the One Faith. Westerners gradually ceased to associate the Nation with religion; religious affiliation came to be seen within the context of the Church, while allegiances multiplied along with the numbers of churches in the land. The process reached its zenith in North America, where religious freedom was accepted as an "absolute freedom" and any group was able to set up its own independent church; at the same time, however, there was no dispute over the idea of the Nation in its political sense.

It was because of secularisation that the Church became a "social institution" and its relationship with the state (another "institution") became a contractual one. The state was seen as an "expression" of the nation, because it united the people on a common civil principle; the churches, on the other hand, reflected the multiplicity of the different faiths and belief systems.

Here it would be appropriate for us to correct a common misconception. The Church was not basically an institution in the administrative and legal sense, and this is still the case today. For Christians the Church has always been the body and spirit of Christ and the Believer's road to salvation, while its administrative aspect is of far less significance when compared with this primary role. That was why the reformers demanded the abolition of the "fee-based Church" and the

restoration of the "spiritual Church," accusing the Popes of charlatanry on the grounds that they gave priority to Church taxes over spiritual matters while according to their own persons the status that should be rightfully given to the Redeemer.

Despite this, the realities of history proved inescapable and matters turned full circle. Eventually the reformers set up their own churches and governments and states began to treat them as social institutions, regardless of the underlying metaphysical factors that identified them with their followers. This undermined the religious concept of the Nation in the Western Christian context, paving the way for a new set of principles ("People," "Patriotism" and "Nationalism") to replace the traditional Church-based notion of allegiance based upon religion.

"Ottoman secularism" was quite different. By accepting religious diversity as an integral part of the *Ummah*'s body, the concept of *Ummah*, or Nation, was reinforced, not weakened. It included diversity within the Islamic religion itself (different schools of *fiqh*, or doctrine/jurisprudence, and Sufi *tariqah*s), as well as a multiplicity of belief systems within the Abrahamic faiths as a whole. And while Islam enjoyed a higher status, other faiths were not excluded.

As the years went by, the concept of *Ummah* came to occupy a central position, while the state became part of it, not a separate entity. Where allegiance was concerned, it was not limited to a single faith, though all were bound to give their allegiance to the Sultan and obey him.

When the Islamic Caliphate entered its critical period, this seriously undermined the concept of the *Ummah* and severed the link between political and religious allegiance. Hitherto, it had been assumed that political allegiance meant submitting oneself to the Sultan's authority in exchange for religious freedom within a system inspired by the spirit of Islam. However, this option now became less attractive to certain minorities who sought to end their status as members of the *Ummah* and become separate nations in their own right; these now declared independence and set up their own national religions in place of the old system under which they had been tolerated and recognized.

Religious allegiance in the Ottoman context was based on the assumption that obedience to God entailed obedience to the Sultan, whatever the latter's actions and policies might be. This was also considered the point at issue by those who called for a return to the basics of the religion with a view to establishing a separation between Allah and the Sultan and between the Qur'an and the Firman (Royal Decree). According to this principle, Sunni Muslims were no longer required to pledge allegiance for religious reasons – only for political ones when required to do so by the Sultan – with the result that the line between the *Ummah*'s political and religious personas became blurred and the Nation as such became hard to define. Consequently, it ceased to be a "natural and human geographical reality" and became merely a "hypothetical geographical entity".

When the Ottoman Empire collapsed and broke up into a number of separate states, the concept of *Ummah* became even more confused and confusing. Although the new states all had their own defined borders, they did not dare to regard themselves as "nations". At the same time, although the great Empire was no more, the *Ummah* continued to be cherished as a fond memory, while other concepts such as "the People" came to be associated with the states which had taken its place. Eventually, the question arose over where the individual's allegiance should lie; should it be to the Arab *Ummah* or the Islamic *Ummah* – both of which are mental constructs, not realities, and aspirations rather than facts?

Throughout this period the word *Ummah* continued to be a term generally recognized in common parlance, while the gulf between "hypothetical" and "actual" geography continued to grow.

At this point it might be appropriate to refer to two terms which are to some extent conceptually related to the idea of the *Ummah*. The first of these – *Jama'ah* (group/community) – is an old expression that has acquired a new meaning, while the second – *Hawiyyah* (identity) – is new in every sense of the word.

Today the word *Jama'ah* is understood by some people to mean the nucleus, or hard core, of an *Ummah* seeking to restore its old borders and

the power it enjoyed in the past. The *Jama'ah* is like DNA in its relationship with a body which is on the point of disintegration yet with the capacity to resurrect itself. Hence the *Jama'ah* finds itself "tailored on the same pattern as the *Ummah*"; it is headed by an *Amir*, just as the *Ummah* was headed by a Sultan, while its members are bound to obey their leader in the same way that the Sultan's subjects pledged allegiance to their ruler in former times.

The term *Hawiyyah* is an odd neologism. Linguistically, it really ought to be *Aniyyah*, from *ana* ("I") rather than *Hawiyyah*, from *huwa* ("he"), since it is a term designed to identify the "self" rather than the "other". Some people see it as a relatively "unassertive" alternative to *Jama'ah* and an oblique way of referring to the "aspiringly resurgent *Ummah*". However, it is more probable that the person who first coined the word was seeking to promote a term that could describe the *Ummah* itself while freeing it from its traditional connotations. Even so, new language does not necessarily lead to new thinking, with the result that today "defining *Hawiyyah*" is discussed in the same terms as "defining the *Ummah*" was in the past and people are unaware that they are dealing with a hypothetical situation rather than a political reality. They fail to realise that a constitution's primary purpose is to provide the state with a system based upon *Muwatanah* (citizenship) rather than to provide the *Ummah* with a system based upon *Hawiyyah*. A constitution is a legal text, not a philosophical one, and its sole function is to lay down the rules for coexistence within the community.

However, the most important issue concealed behind the differences in terminology is this: Who is qualified to speak on behalf of the *Ummah* today and represent it?

We pointed out earlier that the *Ummah*'s claims to be considered synonymous with the *Watan*, or Nation (in a more secular sense), have become somewhat muted in the Arab world – to a point where they have almost fallen silent. One no longer hears talk of an Egyptian, Tunisian or Iraqi *Ummah*; these days the terms *Watan*, *Bilad* (country) or *Dawlah* (state) are used instead to describe an entity based upon geography and *Muwatanah*. However, the legitimacy of that entity must necessarily be weak as long as *Ummah* is a stronger concept than *Watan* and *Hawiyyah* is

stronger than the concept of *Muwatanah*. These days, with the revolutions currently taking place in the Arab world, such an entity is liable to be subjected to strong pressure to place itself under the trusteeship of the *Jama'ah* (as representative of the spirit of the *Ummah* and *Hawiyyah*), regardless of its fragility due to the multiplicity of competing *Jama'ah*s and conflicting interests.

Meanwhile, the supporters of an Arab *Ummah* are losing ground to those who believe in an Islamic *Ummah*. "Arabdom" has become subordinated to "Islam" and "Arab Islamic" has emerged as an acceptable alternative to the disputed terms and concepts of the recent past, while today the word "Islam" is used more in a religious and sectarian sense than as a description of a culture. In previous decades the word "Islamic" referred to Muslim civilization and its achievements, including its non-religious ones; today, however, the crisis of our modern society has given people a narrow and limited vision of what society was really like in earlier times. While "Muslim" was traditionally a word used to describe a person's religious affiliation and "Islamic" was the term for the civilization that was created after the appearance of Islam, "Islamic" in the present meaning of the word is a relatively novel concept which the Islamic (or Islamist) political groups have adopted as their own; in other words, a previously general term has acquired a specific meaning – a meaning that has become even more limited when seen within the context of the *Ummah*'s past and present legitimacy.

The "*Jama'ah*s" are definitely the main beneficiaries of the present confusion between "Muslim and "Islamic" for two reasons:

Firstly, every civilization created by the *Ummah* of Islam is now seen solely in a religious context, whereas previously it had comprised philosophy, literature and the arts and had offered all members of the community (not just adherents of the majority faith) the opportunity to develop their creative talents.

Secondly, by virtue of belonging to these *Jama'ah*s, the Islamist has come to embody the "spirit of the *Ummah*" par excellence, while the ordinary Muslim is seen as failing in his duty to the *Ummah* if he does not

become an Islamist. As we have pointed out, just as coexistence between different members of the community is becoming a less and less feasible prospect, so too is the *Ummah*'s history being increasingly seen as a replica of today's *Ummah* with its violence, strife and rejectionism.

With the concept of the *Ummah* being so cramped and restricted that it becomes synonymous with the *Jama'ah*, and the *Jama'ah* becoming limited to *al Firqah al Najiyah* (the Group Destined for Salvation), a serious conflict over the identity of the *Ummah* itself has arisen between the different factions that are seeking to set themselves up as society's "true representatives of the Faith".

All this, essentially, is a reflection of what we might call "cultural Islam"; that is, a phenomenon embodied in the beliefs and behaviour of the majority of those Muslim individuals for whom the Faith is an inherited social culture – an Islam of traditional institutions representing the different *fiqhi* (doctrinal/jurisprudential), Sufi and Islamo-political trends.

From "cultural Islam's" point of view the *Ummah* is an *a priori*, self-evident "given" that does not need to be formally defined. Its members have a powerful sense of allegiance to it and feel deeply involved in the issues affecting it, and this is something we find reflected in the way that every event which takes place in the Islamic world has global repercussions. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 had an impact upon every Islamic society. That was also the case when the Justice and Development Party came to power in Turkey in 2002; moreover, today we can see how the uprising by Tunisia's youth has ignited the flames of revolution in several Arab countries, while the injustices suffered by the Palestinian people continue to be at the forefront of Arab and Muslim minds everywhere, despite the corruption and strife that has existed in the Palestinian political arena over recent decades.

All these developments reflect the fact that the feelings shared by societies across the Arab and Islamic worlds are the product of a common history, culture and sense of destiny. However, they do not in themselves demonstrate a political consensus. In this context the culture is an anthropological phenomenon which produces similar ways of thinking and

behaving between certain human social groups, though without fusing those groups into a single community.

Institutional Islam's *fiqhi* and Sufi trends are reaping the benefits from those feelings and are trying to translate them into a set of general creedal and behavioural principles. Nevertheless, it is worth noting here that, while institutional Islam formalises those principles, it also shows considerable realism and flexibility in its attitude to the way people implement them. Even so, present-day institutional Islam is first and foremost the latest incarnation of a discourse that has been transmitted to us from one generation to another over the centuries, and like every discourse that is repeated over a significant period, it has evolved from a mere feeling to something much more structured and established.

At the same time, institutional Islam is also a result of real-life experience – and experience tells us that "unity of feeling" does not always mean an acceptance of political unity. Even when Islam is the established religion of the *Ummah*, neither religion nor *Ummah* are necessarily capable of functioning properly within an entity as limited as a single state. Institutional Islam – of the traditional type – sees itself in the role of the state's guide, or helmsman, rather than as its "trustee", but with responsibilities extending beyond the boundaries of the *Watan* to include the *Ummah* as a whole.

The "open *Ummah*" transcends the geographical and political borders of the existing states, which comprise no more than parts of it. Nevertheless, over the centuries institutional Islam has inherited a realistic outlook which has forced it to recognize that the "part" has specific features that cannot be imposed upon the "whole", while characteristics pertaining to the "whole" cannot be imposed upon the "part".

Flexibility and realism are not eternal absolutes. If the state finds itself in a crisis, institutional Islam responds by taking measures to protect itself from the consequences of that crisis and this includes giving greater prominence to the concept of the *Ummah*. On the other hand, if the *Ummah* finds itself in a critical situation the opposite approach applies and the focus of the discourse is on ensuring that the *Watan* does not find itself

having to bear the *Ummah*'s burdens. As the crises affecting the *Watan* tend to be the more frequent, the *Ummah* usually dominates the discourse.

It is probable that the Arab revolutions will boost supply and demand for the term/concept of *Ummah* in the "terminology and concept market", since periods of revolution encourage people to look for ways of formally measuring their significance – either with the aim of preventing revolutionary violence or as a way of giving substance to the revolution's demands. This generally results in a greater role for the traditional institutions in directing public affairs, since the public sphere is really the province of the *Ummah* rather than the state.

Finally, we come to the highest level at which the Islamic political movements engage with the *Ummah* and the state. These movements are not content for the *Ummah* to be merely a "spontaneous feeling"; nor do they accept that there should be a separation between the concept of the *Ummah* and the reality of the state, or that Islam should be "religion and *Ummah*" as opposed to "religion and state".

These movements regard cultural affiliation as a negative factor unless it provides for a transition from what has been inherited to that which is seen as the desired goal – from what is "recognized" to that which has been enshrined in law by the "trustees".

This gives rise to a question which preoccupies all fundamentalists: Are we truly Muslims? Are we fit to belong to the *Ummah* of Islam?

This question assumes that there is a clear line between Muslims and non-Muslims and between one affiliation and another. It means that the *Ummah* of the hypothetical past was the preserve of the *Jama'ah* and the *Ummah* of the future will belong to the *Jama'ah*. As far as the present day is concerned, there is no *Ummah*, since its defining structures and principles no longer exist.

Contrary to institutional Islam's "*Ummah* versus state" dichotomy, in political Islam no such dichotomy exists and the issue is seen in linear terms. The *Jama'ah* will establish the state and under its guidance the state will restore the *Ummah*.

So there are three contending views on the concept of the *Ummah*, and these will have a major impact on the future destinies of the countries of the Muslim world. The *Duwal al Islam al Thaqafiy* ("cultural Islam" states) are inclusive of everyone – even the non-Muslim minorities. The *Dawlat al Islam* ("Islamic state") – in the standard sense of the term – makes a distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims, and even between members of the different Muslim sects; such a state may either model itself on the old *Millet* (confessional communities) system or break up into different confessions and sects. Finally, we come to *Dawlat al Muslimin* ("the state of the Muslims" – in the fundamentalist sense). In this state the *Firqah al Najiyah* impose a single system and set of values on the whole of the community.

It is probable that the next few decades will provide a clearer picture of the course the Arab revolutions are destined to take – in the countries that are currently undergoing their own revolutions as well as those other states which also form part of the *Ummah* and are bound to be affected by events within its borders.