RACISM AND MISMANAGEMENT OF ETHNIC DIVERSITY IN THE ARAB WORLD

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INTRODUCTION

1. The 1996 edition of the *Social Science Encyclopedia* defines racism as the idea that there is direct "correspondence between a group's values, behaviour and attitudes and its physical features"[1] Since its appearance as a doctrine in the nineteenth century, racism has come to imply the belief in the superiority of certain racial groups over others; and hence to justify discrimination against subjection and/or exploitation of the groups which are deemed inferior. While vague and controversial to start with, the concept of 'race' as such is neutral and simply refers to various human groups on the basis of their observable physical characteristics – such as skin and hair colour. Yet 'racism' is neither neutral nor innocent. It is the process of attaching non-observable psycho-cognitive-moral attributes to physically distinct groups. Racism is 'value judgmental,' and it undermines the principles of equality, fair play, and human compassion. As early as the 1950s, the UNESCO recognised the catastrophic implications of racism. It issued a statement on the subject noting that "for all practical social purposes, race is not so much a biological phenomenon as a social myth."[2] Adolf Hitler has expressed concern over the 'Jewish race' and translated his concern into Nazi death camps. Winston Churchill spoke profoundly of the 'British race' and used that pride to spur a nation to fight. Evidently race was a useful political tool for two rather different leaders of the 1940s.[3]

2. A close concept to race is 'ethnicity' which refers to a sense of common historical origins, shared culture, language or religion.[4] Although ethnicity is also a neutral term, one of its derivatives, ethnocentrism, is not. And because it also implies a collective belief of superiority, ethnocentrism is often and erroneously mixed up or equated with racism. Part of the confusion is due to the similar socio-political consequences of racism and ethnocentrism, i.e., prejudice and

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1 The Social Science Encyclopedia, edited by Kuper, Adam and Jessica Kuper. London: Routhedge, 1996, p. 715
2 Quoted in Schaefer, Richard T., Racial and Ethnic Groups, second edition, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1984) pp. 15-16.
3 Ibid p. 16.
4 The Social Science Encyclopedia, op cit., pp 260-61.

discrimination. At the expense of scholarly accuracy, we shall use these two concepts, racism and ethnocentrism, interchangeably.

3. The 1990s witnessed large scale genocides in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and Burundi, akin to what Hitler did fifty years earlier. This time the concept used was 'ethnic cleansing.' More than two million human beings were estimated to be victims of 'ethnic cleansing' in these three countries. Whereas the nineteenth century was that of formulating ideologies of racism, nationalism, ethnocentrism, and communism, the twentieth will go down in human history as the century in which true believers acted on these 'isms.'

4. In fact all the world's armed conflicts since 1988, with the possible exception of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, have been over internal ethno-racial matters. Since 1945, ethnic conflicts have claimed some 20 million lives, several times those resulting from inter-state wars. At present, ethnic conflicts span three old continents. Typical examples are those in Burma and Sri Lanka in Asia; Somalia, Sudan and Rwanda in Africa, the former USSR and Yugoslavia in Europe.[5]

5. Where and how does the Arab world figure in the global scheme of ethno-racial conflicts? With only 8% of world population, the Arab world has had some 25% of all the world's armed conflicts since 1945. Most of these conflicts have been ethno-racially based. Though considered by all concerned as the principal one, the Arab-Israeli conflict (six wars and a continued Palestinian and Lebanese struggle against Israeli occupation) has claimed some 200,000 lives in fifty years. In contrast, during the same period, ethno-racial conflicts have claimed at least twelve times as many lives. The Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) alone matched the same number of casualties as all the Arab-Israeli wars. The Sudanese civil war (on and off since 1956) has claimed at least eight times as many lives as all Arab-Israeli wars. The same relative costs apply in terms of population displacement, material devastation, and financial expenditure.[6]

6. In the 1990s, the armed conflicts in the region were more of the intra-state than of the inter-state variety. Militant Islamic activism is to be added to the ongoing sources of armed civil strife in a score of Arab countries. Algeria and Egypt were two prominent cases in point. Thus, the greatest threat to security of the states in the region are likely to be internal.[7] The civil war in Yemen in 1994 was a possible preview of things to come. The ideological and regional dimensions of the conflict were entangled with sectarian ones. The manipulation or spill-over effects of each internal armed conflicts could, of course, lead to inter-state conflicts as well.

7. The disproportionality of ethno-racial conflicts vis-à-vis inter-state conflicts is more surprising in view of the global sociocultural demographics of the Arab world. With the broadest definition of ethnicity, as referring to contiguous or co-existing groups differing in race, religion, sect, language, culture or national origin,[8] the Arab world region is one of the more ethno-racially homogeneous area in the world today. In 1998, the Arab world alone (which does not include Turkey, Iran and Israel) had a population of slightly over 260 million. The overwhelming majority (80.0% i.e., 190 millions) share the same ethnic characteristics. Racially, they are a Semitic-Hamitic-Caucasian mix. Religiously, they are Muslims of the Sunni denomination. Culturally and linguistically, they are Arabic speaking natives. In terms of national origin, they have been rooted for many centuries in the same 'Arab Homeland' (extending from Mauritania on the Atlantic Ocean to Bahrain in the Arab Persian Gulf). This overwhelming majority (of

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5 For a recent overview of worldwide ethnic conflicts, see Diamond, Larry and Marc F. Plattner (eds), Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict, and Democracy, Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press 1994.

6 For details and documentation see, Ibrahim, Saad Eddin, Sects, Ethnicity, and Minority Groups in the Arab World, (1994) (Arabic), Cairo: Ibn Khaldoun Center, pp. 15-18, and pp. 225-90, and pp. 323-69.

7 Ibid pp. 725-49.

8 See also Diamond and Plattner's definition in Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict, op.cit, p. XVII; Fukuyama, Francis, "The End of History," The National Interest, 16 (summer 1989), pp. 3-18, and idem, The End of History and the Last Man, New York: Free Press, 1992, p. 201.

80%) gets even bigger as we add groups which differ in only one ethnic variable that is perceived by the respective group itself as being a marginal element in the definition of its identity. For example, most Shia'a Muslims and most Christians living in the Arab world consider their 'Arabism' as the primary axis of their identity, superseding their Shi'ism or Christianity. For them, the linguistic-cultural variable is the more salient ethnic-divide. On this basis, the Arab majority jumps to over 86.0% of the population in the Arab world.

8. Despite the apparent ethnic homogeneity on the pan-Arab level, we observe marked ethnic heterogeneities in the Sudan, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania, Bahrain, and Yemen. In these nine countries, as many as 35% or more of the population differ from the Arab Muslim Sunni Caucasian majority in one or more of the four ethnic variables (of language, religion, sect, or race). It is noted that nearly all nine countries are located at the outer rim of the Arab world, often intersecting a cultural borderland. In all nine countries, there has been some overt form of ethnic tension. In four of them – Sudan, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen – such tensions have flared up in recent decades into an armed protracted conflict. The unity and territorial integrity of each has been seriously threatened.[9]

THE IDENTITY PROBLEMATIQUE

9. The main competing ideological paradigms in the Arab world, since the turn of the century, tend to be exclusionary of certain ethnic groups from full-fledged membership of the political community. At present, the Arab intellectual-political space is dominated by Islamic and secular nationalist ideologies. Each has its own locus of political identity.

The Islamist vision and ethnicity

10. Islamists, naturally, base the political bond of culture, society, and state on religion. This would automatically exclude non-Muslims from the respective polities of the Arab world -- some 23 million, mostly Christians together with a few hundred thousand Jews. In its extreme purist form, the exclusion would entail some 21.0 million non-Sunni Muslims as well (various Shia and Kharajite sects). Mainstream Islamists would make that exclusion partial – i.e., confined to banning non-Muslims from assuming top commanding offices (e.g. heads of state, governors, and the judiciary).[10] Their rationale is that holders of such offices perform not only temporal roles but also carry out religious duties. The purist Islamists would make the exclusion of non-Muslims complete from any state or governmental role at any level. To them, non-Muslims are to exist as 'protected communities,' (ahl zimma), run their own communal affairs, and pay the jezia (a poll tax). So long as they respect the Muslim majority and recognise the sovereignty of the Islamic state, non-Muslim communities are to be treated with respect, compassion and religious tolerance.

11. In this vision, all Muslims are considered equal regardless of their race, culture, or national origin. Accordingly, Muslim Kurds (in Iraq and Syria), Berbers (in Algeria and Morocco) and Blacks (in Mauritania and Sudan) are not considered 'minorities.' Together these Muslim though non-Arab, groups number over 20.0 millions. This Islamist vision of the political order would naturally be welcomed by non-Arab but Muslim members of the community, in which citizenship is based on

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9 For full account of civil armed conflicts in Iraq, Sudan, and Lebanon, see Ibrahim, Saad Eddin, Sects, Ethnicity and Minority Groups, op.cit, pp. 225-90, pp. 323-60, and pp. 601-29.

10 Korm, George. Variety of Religions and Regimes: A Comparative Sociological and Legal Study, (Arabic) Beirut: El Nahar Publishing Center, 1979, pp. 196-261 (Arabic); Howeidy, Fahmy, Citizens Not Protected (Arabic), Cairo: Dar El Sherouk, 1990; see also a debate between Howeidy and this author on this issue in Al-Ahram, (Cairo Arabic daily), March 14, 21, 28, and April 4, 1995.

religion. Obviously, in such a polity non-Muslims in the Arab world would feel quite threatened, as well as alienated.

Arab nationalist vision

12. The Arab nationalist vision, started to unfold in the last decades of the Ottoman Empire. It emerged as a reaction to both Ottoman despotism and the Young Turks' chauvinism. In its pure form, the Arab nationalist vision is predicated on culture and language as the pillars of political identity of state, society and citizenship. In this sense, Arab nationalism has been a secular ideology. Accordingly, all native speakers of Arabic, bearers of Arab culture, and who perceive themselves as Arabs would be full-fledged members of the Arab nation, enjoying full rights of citizenship – regardless of race, religion or sect. The Arab nationalist vision would not recognise other non-Arab national or cultural groups living in the 'Arab Homeland' as autonomous communities or as independent entities in their own right. However, their individual members would be treated as equal Arab citizens under the law.

13. Thus, while the Islamists would exclude non-Muslims, the Arab nationalists would exclude non-Arabs from full-fledged membership of the polity. Naturally non-Arabs (i.e. Berbers, Kurds, and Black Africans) would feel threatened by the Arab nationalist vision. This is particularly the case with sizeable non-Arab communities which have national aspirations of their own (e.g., the Kurds) or who are keen on preserving their cultural integrity and language (e.g., the Berbers). Also, some non-Muslim communities fear that despite its secular appearance, Arab nationalism has its Islamic underpinnings. This apprehension is to be found explicitly among the Maronite Christians of Lebanon, and implicitly among the Christian Copts of Egypt. Hence, each of the competing paradigms of identity in the Arab world would exclude what the other would include in their respective definition of the political community.

THE INTERACTABLE QUESTION OF IDENTITY

14. In the Arab world, as elsewhere, the question of identity is one of the most vexing socio-political cleavages. It taps cultural, symbolic, and existential notions of individual and collective self. Unlike other cleavages (e.g. class, occupational, educational, ideological, political), ethnic identity and the conflicts it generates are "intrinsically less amenable to compromise than those revolving around material issues."[11] Both the Islamic and nationalist visions have failed to take into account sub-identities within their own broad primordial frame of reference. Thus, Islamic visionaries have tended to down play sectarian cleavages within and between fellow Muslims. In the Lebanese civil war (1975-89), more Shia'a and Sunni Muslims killed each other than they killed Christians. Indeed, more Shia'a Muslims killed each other than they killed Sunni and Druze Muslims; and than Christians of all sects. By the same token, more Christians were killed by other Christians than of or by Muslims in the Lebanese civil war.[12]

15. Equally, proponents of the pan-Arab nationalist vision have been seriously discredited by actions of regimes spousing that vision. The quarter of a century rivalry between the two Baathist regimes in Iraq and Syria is a dramatic case in point. It just happens that the elite of each regime belongs to a different religious Muslim minority sect in their respective countries.[13]

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11 Diamond and Plattner, op.cit, p. XVIII.

12 Packradoni, Karim, "Toward Ethnically Egalitarian Arab Societies" a paper submitted to the conference on The UN Declaration on Minorities' Rights and Peoples of the Arab World and the Middle East, Limassol, Cyprus, May 12-14, 1994.

13 The Iraqi élite led by Saddam Hussain's clan since 1968, comes from the Arab Sunni Muslim town of Tikrit. The Sunni Muslims of Iraq do not exceed 35% of Iraqi's total population – compared to over 45.0% Arab Shi'a

16. Thus, well delineated as the two competing visions of identities in the Arab world may be, they have failed in practice to project a coherent or consistent political program. They have failed to deal with sub-identities, let alone their interplay with other socio-economic variables. The few times in which proponents of either vision seized power, they made life for ethno-racial groups much worse – e.g. the Baathist Arab nationalist vis-à-vis the Kurds in Iraq; and the Islamist vis-à-vis the non-Muslim Negroid in the Sudan. For instance, with the exception of Egypt, the alienation of ethnic groups vis-à-vis the ruling military-ideological single-party regimes has grown into overt unrest. In Iraq, Syria, Sudan, Algeria, and Mauritania it has erupted into violent confrontations of varying degrees during the last three decades. At present, there is protracted armed conflict in the Sudan, Somalia, and Iraq. At times it is not only the legitimacy of the ruling regime which is challenged by this or that ethnic group, but also the legitimacy of the state itself.

THE SOCIAL QUESTION: MOBILISATION AND EQUITY

17. The twin process of Western penetration and the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire led, among other things, to the breakdown of the traditional organisation of ethnic groups in the Arab world. Their residential and occupational patterns have become less segregated. With independence, the social mobilisation and integration into the societal mainstream was greatly expedited; and their political consciousness markedly heightened. Modern education, urbanisation, expanding means of communication and exposure to the mass media, have all been instrumental in this respect.

18. As elsewhere in developing regions, this social mobilisation was accompanied or followed by a steady rise in expectations on the part of ethno-racial groups in the Arab world. Those expectations included quests for greater share in power, wealth, and prestige in their newly independent countries. The brief liberal experiment in several Arab states satisfied the quest of ethnic groups for political participation, but not as much their quest for social justice – i.e., an equitable share in wealth. The early years of military-ideological populist regimes satisfied ethnic groups or promised to do so, as far as social equity is concerned. Put into effect were such redistributional measures as land reform, nationalisation of foreign and upper class assets, an open and free system of education, the provision of equal opportunities and the adoption of meritocracy systems of employment. However, as these regimes got consolidated and their tenure in power lasted, even the reality and/or promise of greater equity began to erode for all non-ruling groups, including ethno-racial minorities.

19. Thus, with political participation long curtailed, and social mobilization continuing unabated, while progress in social equity coming to a halt or worsening, structural-relative deprivation has been steadily rising since the 1970s. Such deprivations have been felt more by ethno-racial groups than by other sectors in society. Consequently, they were the first and the loudest in expressing their resentment against what by now has become an authoritarian-bureaucratic ruling class, with ideological trappings fading into the background.

20. Instead of responding to such protestations by resuming the march of social equity or reopening the political system for more participation, most Arab authoritarian-bureaucratic regimes responded by greater coercion domestically and/or military adventures externally. Thus, the Syrian regime got embroiled in the Lebanese civil war (since 1975); the Iraqi regime in two Gulf wars (with Iran 1980-88, and in Kuwait with an international coalition in 1990-91); the Libyan regime in Chad (1975-1988); the Algerian regime in a proxy war with Morocco in the Sahara (1976-1990); and the Mauritanian regime in series of armed skirmishes with Senegal (1990-1991).

Muslims, and 15.0% Kurdish Muslims. The Syrian élite led by Hafez al-Assad's clan since 1970s, comes from a small Alawite Shi'a sect (town of Querdaha) which constitutes no more than 16.0% of Syria's total population.

21. Both mounting coercion internally and military adventures externally have had the effect of earmarking a greater share of state budgets to arms purchase and the dwindling share of social programmes. Thus social equity continued to worsen further for all non-ruling groups, but more so for ethno-racial minorities. Thus the ethnic divide in several Arab countries has been intensified by a class divide.[14] The combination of class-ethno-racial deprivation needed one more factor to erupt into an open armed conflict – a foreign ally

EXTERNAL PENETRATION AND ETHNIC IN THE ARAB WORLD

22. Because of its unique strategic location as well as resources, especially oil, the Middle East has been a target of domination by rival foreign powers in the last two centuries. Meanwhile, several structural weaknesses in the Arab world were accentuated by such powers to enhance their hegemonic designs. The ethnic question has been one of those weaknesses. As early as the late eighteenth century, rival Western powers scrambled for a client-sponsorship of various ethnic groups, that lived in the provinces of the declining Ottoman Empire. This was to be a pretext for possible inheritance of such provinces upon the final demise of the Sick Man of Europe. A case in point was France's sponsorship of the Christian Maronites, Britain's of the Druz Muslims, and Russia's of the Christian Orthodox – all in one Arab-Ottoman province, Greater Syria.

23. On the whole, ethnic groups in the Arab world remained long reluctant and sceptical of such unsolicited guardianship of foreign powers. But as corruption and despotism of the ailing Ottoman Empire reached an all time high, some of these groups accepted to be under such guardianships for protection not only against the central authorities but also against real or perceived threats from other indigenous ethnic groups at home.

24. This nineteenth century pattern of big powers meddling into the Arab world's ethnic affairs would continue into the twentieth century, both under direct colonial rule of fragmented Arab polities, as well as after their formal independence. After World War II, with more independent new states in the region, several external actors have also been involved, often by proxy, in the ethnic affairs of one another. Notoriously among the latter were Israel (in Lebanon, Iraq, and the Sudan), Iran (in Iraq and Lebanon), Ethiopia (in the Sudan) and France and Senegal (in Mauritania).[15] Likewise, at times some Arab states meddled in the ethnic question of neighbouring Arab and non-Arab states (e.g. Syria in Lebanon and Iraq; Iraq in Lebanon, Syria, and Iran; Sudan in Ethiopia).[16]

25. Rarely, however, did the external factor alone trigger serious ethnic conflicts. Responsible for such conflicts, primarily, were indigenous factors of political, socio-economic, or cultural nature, of the kind discussed above. What the external factor does, if played out, is to intensify, complicate and protract such conflicts. This is especially the case with armed ethnic conflicts, which tend, over time, to create a political economy and a sub-political culture of their own – far beyond the original issues of the conflict. The civil wars in Lebanon, Sudan, and Iraq are dramatic cases in point.

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14 See Ibrahim, Saad Eddin, "Civil Society and Prospects of Democratisation in the Arab World," in Norton, Augustus Richard, Civil Society in the Middle East, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995, pp. 27-54.
15 Ibid. pp. 840-60.
16 Ibid. pp. 840-60.

ETHNICITY, CIVIL SOCIETY, AND DEMOCRATISATION

26. The ethno-racial question is one of the most serious challenges facing the Arab world at large, and, in particular, those Arab states with a marked ethnic diversity. The nascent system of modern country-states as well as Arab intelligentsia have failed to comprehend or deal with the ethnic problem frontally on its own merit. To begin with, the caesarean birth of many of the Arab states at the hands of colonial midwives brought to existence a number of seriously deformed Arab states. Had the liberal experiment been allowed to continue; or was resumed, say a decade or two after its interruption, much of the early socio-economic deformities may have been corrected through a genuine process of participation. Under populist and non-democratic rule the ethno-racial question worsens. The ideological discourse of both Islamists and Nationalists has not helped either. Each tends to be exclusionary of certain groups. The worst hit by such exclusion are ethno-racial groups which are not Arab, Muslim, or Caucasian, e.g., Black African groups in the Sudan and in Mauritania.

27. Participatory political systems have proven to be the most effective modality of peaceful management of social cleavages in general, and ethnic conflict in particular. Primordial loyalties are often moderated, reduced, or even eliminated as modern socio-economic formations (e.g. classes and occupational groups) freely evolve. Based on interest, the latter offer members of ethno-racial groups a substitute or at least a partial alternative for collective protection and enhancement of legitimate rights and needs. They allow the kind of criss-crossing modern associational networks which have come to be lumped under the concept of 'civil society.'

28. Participatory politics may in some Arab countries contribute to initial political instability or lead itself to various forms of demagoguery. Rival ethnic leaders may engage in 'upsmanship politics,' as we saw vividly in the case of Barzani and Talabani of Iraq's Kurds. But in the medium and long runs, responsible democratic politics is bound to prevail. We have seen some of that in Mauritania in the 1990s.[17] In countries with sizeable ethnic groups concentrated in one province or a geographic area, separatist tendencies may also be expected, once the political system is opened to free expression and free balloting – as is vividly, and sometimes tragically, witnessed in the former USSR and Yugoslavia. While such a right must be conceded in principle, it could practically result in chaos.

29. Hence, the way out of the present dilemmas of all Arab states, but especially those with marked ethno-racial diversity, is a triangular formula of civil society, democracy, and federalism. This triangle would be further enhanced by regional peace and economic co-operation. In the late 1990s, all the positive ingredients for it are present. It only needs political imagination and the political will of new leaderships to skilfully engineer those ingredients together into a harmonious regional mosaic.

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17 See an account of this evaluation in Mohamedou, Mohamed, Mahmoud, Societal Transition to Democracy in Mauritania Cairo:Ibn Khaldun Center, 1995, pp. 113-23 and pp. 193-98.