

# An Arab and Muslim Middle East? No thanks!

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**This article, which appeared in the liberal Turkish daily Hürriyet, is Masri Feki's response to coverage in The Guardian newspaper of his lecture on minorities given at the London Middle East Institute on 18 September 2008.**

Last month, The Guardian's own Brian Whitaker wrote a CiF piece called "Minority rights? No thanks!" His article, a response to a lecture I had given the previous evening at the London Middle East Institute, reduced the Middle East minority issue to a question of oppression by authoritarian regimes. Everyone is oppressed in this part of the world, he argued, no matter which community they come from. Whitaker produced examples of authoritarian rule by so-called minorities – Alawites in Syria and Sunnis in Bahrain. I could not disagree more strongly.

Firstly, these examples are ill-chosen. The regimes in question are both Arab and Muslim and proclaim themselves so. They do not suffer the tribulations and anxieties faced by Kurds in Syria or Copts in Egypt. They cleave from the rest of society as clans or tribes, not as national or religious groupings. Apart from the issue of bad governance – afflicting almost the entire region - minorities who do not fit into the grand Arab-Muslim design (with its twin poles of Islamism and Arabism), foisted on us following the fall of the Ottoman empire, face troubles specific to them.

Let me explain why.

## **Political Islam is incompatible with citizenship:**

Almost all Arab regimes claim that minorities are protected by their constitutional principles, but Islam is a primary source of state law. Furthermore, the rise of Islamism has seriously eroded citizens' rights. So-called secular regimes have had to retreat in the face of the Islamist opposition, although the latter lack popular support and legitimacy. Rejecting the modern concept of citizens' rights, political Islam sets non-Muslims apart from civil society. The constitution is immutable: it is there by divine right and comes from the Creator of the Universe. It is absolutist by nature and excludes unbelievers, and thus non-Muslims.

Even those Arab regimes claiming to be socialist progressive (Egypt, Syria and Baathist Iraq) have, through their passivity, encouraged political Islam. It was under Sadat that Islam first invaded public life in the 1970s. The Muslim Brotherhood underwent a honeymoon period with the man who called himself 'the believing president'. Islamists gained key posts in the civil service and the universities. With their literalist reading of the Koran excluding infidels from public life, they were, in the eyes of Sadat, a bulwark against Communism, while the Copts became the preferred targets of Islamist violence and generalised discrimination. These 15 percent of Egyptians only have 1.5 percent of public service jobs and only one seat in Parliament out of 444. They are almost entirely excluded from the army and the judiciary. A ban on practising obstetrics or teaching Arabic, legal and bureaucratic constraints on the building and maintenance of Christian places of worship and the virtual invisibility of the Christian communities on the political scene and in the media are not only concrete proof of discrimination but of the authorities' reluctance to end it – a fact which is regularly denounced in UN human rights reports.

### **Not all Arabic-speakers are Arabs:**

A common language is only one uniting factor between disparate members of a given nation. Just as religion does not define ethnicity, so language is not a sufficiently objective criterion for constituting a single nation. In fact Egyptians are not any more Arab than Mexicans and Peruvians are Spanish. What defines a nation are geography, values, common political conventions, ideas, interests, affections, common memories and aspirations. Running counter to all the nationalist experiences that crown observable, objective, national facts, pan-Arab nationalism has created the Arab nation. It has not been created by it. The arbitrary notion of a nation, which makes people Arabs despite themselves for the simple reason that they speak Arabic, casts aside key historical narratives and legitimate national claims.

This is not to reject Arab identity as illegitimate. Arab nationalism (Arabism) is not illegitimate in itself, but its over-arching claim to pan-Arabism denies the national identities of those non-Arab peoples which have adopted Arabic as their national language (Egyptians, Sudanese, Somalis) as well as those who have not. The forced arabisation of Kurds in Iraq and Syria, the ongoing persecution of Copts in Egypt, Assyrians and Chaldeans in Iraq, the continuing harassment of the last Jews of Yemen and Syria, and recourse to violence, intimidation and cultural denial if any minority refuses to be crushed under the boot of pan-Arabism, reflects the bellicose chauvinism of this ideology.

### **The Middle East is a region of diversity:**

Pan-Arabism is an astounding concept of national and religious identity and one at total variance with great Arab values. It does not represent the cultural, ethnic, religious and linguistic mosaic that has always been the Middle East. It is time to make the distinction between Arabs and Muslims on the one hand, and Arab identity and language on the other.

If anything positive has come from military intervention in Iraq and the toppling of Saddam Hussein (apart from the first timid stirrings of a democratic process) it has been that a great and resilient religious, ethnic and cultural diversity has been unveiled in the Middle East. The real challenge facing us is whether we can accept 'the Other' in all his difference and identity.