The Ummah: Real or Imaginary

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“Tell me one thing Dr. Khan,” he said very softly and hesitantly. “Why do Muslims talk so much about Muslim World\(^1\), really there is no such thing you know, why can’t they focus more on their countries rather than on this imaginary idea?”

As we all walked towards the food court to have lunch, one American Muslim, one Indian Muslim, one Turkish Muslim, one Muslim from Philippines, one Muslim from Egypt and one Indian Hindu; all professors. It was the scholar from India who whispered the question to me. We were at the recently concluded annual conference of the International Studies Association (ISA)\(^2\). After participating in a panel on Islam and International Relations we were heading out for lunch.

“Maybe Muslims have not fully embraced the Westphalian system\(^3\) and the modern notion of citizenship,” I responded. I was more interested in first understanding his views rather than engaging with them. I thought the multinational nature of our lunch group should have answered his question but he was looking at us through the lens of nation states and we were to him only a motley bunch of foreign scholars. Whereas we were a bunch of Muslim scholars from all over the world trying to create an Islam and International Relations subsection at the ISA\(^4\).

“Take the case of Indian Muslims,” he continued, “they seem more concerned with what is happening with the Arab World, than the Arab World is concerned with what happens to them”. If they thought of themselves as Indians and cared as much about India as they do about Palestine, then perhaps both India and their condition would be much better.”

After an interesting conversation about the tension between nationalism and pan-Islamism\(^5\), he finished his lunch and rushed off to the next panel, unaware that he had left me once again grappling with the problematic of hyphenated identities and multiple citizenships.

I recalled giving the keynote lecture at a fundraiser by American Muslims of Indian origin in Minnesota a few years ago. I remembered asking the crowd a rhetorical question – “who is an Indian Muslim?” It was to my mind a political question and I was surprised by the theological answers I got. An Indian Muslim, I was informed is one who believes in God, his prophets, his
I was baffled by the answer. I responded, “If Indian Muslims do not include India in their identity, then they should not complain if India excludes Islam from its conception of the self.” It was now the audience’s turn to be baffled. If Indian Muslims must belong to India then they should have a coherent answer to what is Indian about Indian Muslims. Start a conversation about what is Egyptian about Egyptian Muslims and what is Moroccan about Moroccan Muslims and you will get a lively conversation. The Turks are so proud of their Turkish heritage, about their language and Istanbul. Indeed the vast majority of Turks who are proud of their Turkishness are more in numbers than those Turks who are proud of their Muslimness.

We still live in the age of nation states. As globalization homogenizes tastes and preferences and also develops global norms around the ideas of democracy and human rights, the possibility of global citizenship is emerging. But when it comes to legal identities nation states still rule. There is no such thing as a global visa or global passport.

While the world is still developing a global consciousness, Muslims have always had an intuitive conception of global citizenship through the idea of Ummah. Every Muslim belongs to the Ummah, regardless of her race or nationality. But today, Muslim identities are increasing in their multiplicity to the point of fragmentation.

We are Muslims, but we are also Turks and Pakistanis and Egyptians and Americans. We are Muslims but we are also Salafis and Sufis. We are Muslims but we are also Shia and Sunni and Zaidis. Diversity is good and beautiful and empowering, but only as long as it is not divisive or proving dysfunctional. It is ironic that while the rest of the world is trying to integrate identity through global governance and global consciousness, Muslims are allowing visionless politics to fragment their already globalized sense of the self.

Muslims today are in a limbo. We sadly talk Ummah but act sectarian. While Europeans can travel without visas within Europe, Muslims need a visa to go even to the Kaaba. Europeans have done more today to integrate and create a European Ummah. But Muslims in spite of tradition, shared history and religious identity, can only talk about Ummah but not realize it.

Ummah or the Muslim World, sadly it remains an aspirational concept today and not an operationalized reality.
1 Khan, MA Muqtedar. "Debating Moderate Islam: The Geopolitics Of Islam And The West (Utah Series In Turkish And Islamic Stud) (2007)

2 http://www.isanet.org/Conferences/New-Orleans-2015

3 http://www.e-ir.info/2014/02/03/how-westphalian-is-the-westphalian-model/

4 http://www.coiris.org


6 https://honeyfortheheart.wordpress.com/40-hadith/hadith-02-the-hadith-of-jibreel/