



SORAN UNIVERSITY
Kurdistan Center for Middle Eastern Research

Journal of Middle Eastern Research 1 (2017) 46-56



IISKS

A Reading of Religious Nationalism in the Context of Arabic Neo-Fascism

Hawre Sorkhabi¹

Abstract

This essay seeks to analyze the concept of *religious nationalism* and elucidate the critique of ideology from a Žižekian perspective to designate the concept as a semantic element of Arabic Neo-fascism. In order for this to be analyzed, it was derived from Arabic Neo-fascist Ideology. The major question to ask, through applying an ideology critique model, is how Arabic Neo-fascist ideology combined religion and nationalism to serve Arabic nationalistic ideology (*Oroube*). Having analyzed the texts produced by authors of Arabic Neo-fascism, such as Michel Aflaq and using *the critique of ideology* model, it was shown that religious nationalism, as a semantic element of Arabic Neo-fascism ideology, has led to giving opportunity to Arabic nationalism and exploiting religion in favor of *Oroube*. In the final analysis, and by virtue of the above proposition, it was revealed that the Neo-fascist ideology in the Middle East, through giving hegemony to the Arab nation, attempted to strengthen Arabic nationalism by means of religion - which is a guise to cover Arab nationalism.

¹ PhD at Political Philosophy. E-mail: hawre.sorkhabi48@yahoo.com

Keywords

Ideology, Neo-fascism, The Arab Nation, Religious nationalism, Arab Middle East

Introduction

Islam is considered a movement under an Arabic guise which is, in fact, designated as a sub-category of Pan-Arabism in Arabic neo-fascism (Aflaq 1975, 125); Arabic neo-fascism does not account for Islam based on a philosophical and divine attitude, rather, it exploits Islam by way of its particular reading and interpretation, to the benefit of Arabic nationalism. Neo-fascism's ideologues (including Michel Aflaq and Zaki Arsouzi) claim that Islam could revitalize the Arab spirit and gather the whole Arab nation together under an Arab state. To justify this, Arabic neo-fascists argue that God has sent Islam to the Arab's land in Arabic, which is itself an indication of the grandeur of the Arab nation and spirit. Therefore, they regard Islam as complementary to Arabic nationalism (ibid., 128); an Arab has to be a nationalist before being a Muslim. To look through the lens of ideology critique, they give priority to the significance of the *Arab nation* over *Islam*. Arabic nationalism consequently turns into a belief that needs to be alive in every individual Arab's spirit. This is why Michel Aflaq introduced the Prophet Mohammad as a model and considers him as the Arab national hero, the one whom all have to follow (ibid., 126).

Theoretical framework

The concept of ideology, like many other concepts in the modern world, is the offspring of the age of enlightenment. As Terry Eagleton states, a negative aura has surrounded the concept of ideology today; in usual conversation, if we say someone is

speaking ideologically, it usually means that his/her viewpoints about different issues have some inclinations that are conducted with a series of fixed propositions (Eagleton 1999, 1). The term 'ideology' was invented by Destutt de Tracy in the late eighteenth century. He attempted to define the science of mental phenomena that, in his view, was the necessary consequence of the materialist philosophy of Holbakh and Hellocius.

The concept of ideology in the works of Marx underwent a deep change. According to Marx, ideology means the sense of false consciousness which emanates from social agents of the class position: the reality of social relations is distortedly offered to consciousness of social agents. As a result, social agents, by virtue of their position in the production system, have a one-dimensional view of reality (Suretsky 1981, 30).

However, the most prominent theoretician who revolutionized the concept of ideology is Louis Althusser. Althusser's essay *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, distinguishes between the repressive apparatuses of state (government, army, police, courts, prisons, etc.) and the ideological apparatuses of (church, education, family, parties, unions, etc.). The repressive apparatuses of state mainly act based on violence while the state ideological apparatuses act primarily with ideology (Althusser 1999, 153-158)

Another recent theorist of ideology, Slavoj Žižek, like Althusser, emphasizes ideology as the imaginary symbolic relationship forms of social class, race and gender. However, unlike Althusser, he believes that ideology surpasses its social and political forms (Žižek, 2008: xxx-xxxi). In this context, ideology supports the lack of contradictions that lie to themselves. The ideology of nationalism and racism are types of cultural fantasy with the result that the forms of sensual pleasure,

which continuously replace the unconscious mind with extreme violence, murder and ethnic cleansing. Žižek believes that the multiple eruptions of neo-nationalism and tribal xenophobia throughout Europe in the 1990s are typical of this displacement. In his view, racism is an external displacement that people cannot accept among themselves.

To Žižek, the most significant characteristic of Marx's ideology is expressed as follows: "They do not know but they do it". The significant matter in this definition is a kind of negligence from the reality that we live in. On one hand, there is the reality and on the other our perception of that reality is distorted in some way. Ideology is precisely this distortion that affects our understanding. (Myers 2004, 64).

What is striking about Žižek's ideas on ideology, which is implicitly emphasized in this article, is that following Peter Sloterdijk, the German theorist, he believes that we are all cynical subjects. We, as cynical subjects, know that our perception of reality is distorted but we also are stuck with that false comprehension and do not reject it. In other words, it could reconstruct Sloterdijk's state in the case of new status of groups and fascist movements in the Middle East as follows: "they know that by the deed they do, they follow the illusion but they do it yet" (Ibid., 67-68).

In his book, *Mapping Ideology*, Žižek recognizes three meanings in the concept of ideology: the ideology as a doctrine (teaching) or a set of beliefs, ideology as something that will be determined in institutions and practices and ideology as a mysterious network of attitudes and implicit pseudo-self-motivated assumptions that forms the complex moment of the representation of non-ideological acts (Žižek, 1994: 15). The final definition of ideology is of psychoanalytic characters and is more

popular to Žižek, because he is interested in the Lacanian model of social reality.

Fundamental concepts in the theory of ideology critique

In this approach, there are three key words that can be applied to understand the characteristics of fascism in the original text. These concepts are the imaginary, the symbolic and the real which are explained respectively. In Lacan's theory, three concepts have a central role: the imaginary, the symbolic and the real. The imaginary is referred to as the illusion or imagination that is concerned with the image of the body as a cohesive unit. This illusion about the coherence and integrity can make real effects. (Lacan and Macey 1994, xxi). In other words, the imaginary is the pre-Oedipal stage of child development in Freud's theory. The symbolic is connected to the realm of language and culture and the real is anything that that is out of the access of the Imaginary and the symbolic which simultaneously affects subject and its acts. For Žižek, the real is roughly equivalent to unconscious: "the irreducible core of 'jouissance' (pleasure) that resists any symbolization. (Milner and Browitt 2002, 82-83)

Instrumental attitude to Islamic nationalism or nationalistic Islam

Being comprehensive and nationalistic, neo-fascist ideology considers Islam a political and nationalistic movement whose purpose is to unite the Arab nations. In fact, it regards Islam as Arabic civilization rather than a divine and spiritual religion. An attitude of this kind is indicative of the fact that the Ba'ath party tries to gather together the whole Arab nation under an Arabic state and Islam merely acts as "the imaginary" which facilitates

the process of neo-fascist identification. A question arises here: how does the Arabic neo-fascist ideology combine religion and nationalism to the advantage of *Oroube* ideology? Does this not give rise to some paradoxical thoughts with respect to the Prophet's equal attitude toward different nations? In the first place, the Arabic neo-fascist ideology, Islam, carries with it an Arabic spirit. Also, if Islam represents the Prophet's lifestyle, this does not refer to a mere simple historical event in a certain place and time, rather it is closely connected to the Arab's existence. Indeed, Islam is a symbol of Arabic identity and psychological nature (Aflaq 1975, 124). Arabic neo-fascist ideology does not look at the philosophy and the emergence of Islam from a philosophical and epistemological viewpoint; based on its account, it regards Islam as a phenomenon which is bound up with Arabic existence and is a psychological symbol of Arabic community. In fact, Islam revealed the hidden potential of the Arab and provoked them to sustain Arabic unity. The neo-fascist ideology claims that the Prophet, who was chosen by God to bring the message of humanity, was Arabic. All the people around the Prophet were Arabic, the land in which he was preaching belonged to the Arab. Therefore, they believe "the story of Islam has risen from its natural origin, which was Arabic and engendered Arabic myths" (ibid., 126). This is the imaginary which has its origins in the past and becomes a factor of integration of Arabic nationalism and the unity of the Arab under a state.

'God could have chosen another nation for preaching Islam, but he didn't want it so'. That is why God chose the Arab, Arabic heroes and myths in that they possessed good characteristics and the historical period which was chosen for preaching Islam was appropriate enough for spreading the major message of the Arab

among the people (*ibid.*, 127). Islam was not only an Arabic movement but it also represented the reconstruction project of the Arab nation. Accordingly, they assume it is linguistically and geographically Arabic. Such Pan-Arabist thoughts were associated with Saddam Hussein and Michel Aflaq. In 1983, Saddam Hussein posed, among the religious figures, the question as to why God sent the Quran in Arabic (Hanna, 1978: 4). Michel Aflaq had answered this question four years ago: “at the time, there were only the Arab Muslims, though the Arab was mentally and spiritually in a high and perfect level. In point of fact, Islam, as an Arabic movement, was meant to complement Arabic nationalism” (Aflaq 1975, 127). Here it is mostly the symbolic which originated from the imaginary that represents Arabic culture and language.

Ba’ath put emphasis on Islamic values as it highlighted the nationalistic layers of Islam; it is revealed that Islam is in the service of Arabic nationalism. By emphasizing “nationalistic Islam,” Ba’ath brings to the fore a new historical theory: Arabic imperialism historical theory serves the hegemony of a kind of political monopoly.

Pan-Arabism does not put emphasis on the grandeur of Islamic history as an Islamic civilization; rather it considers it an ideological phenomenon and ‘ideologies’ the essence of Islam. To put it another way, it synchronizes Islam with Pan-Arabism nationalism. With regard to the approach which is employed on the part of Arabic nationalist Islam, Pan-Arabism ideology seeks to highlight the Arab nation as an invaluable nation compared to other nations. Based on Ba’ath logic, the Prophet and his four Caliphs, the Abbasid and the Omayyad, as politicians, have to express themselves as if they have been representatives of Arabic mentality and spirit, which has its roots in imagery. Michel Aflaq

was going to combine Islam and Arabic nationalism (as the way ideology intended) stated: “as today we call some people patriots or nationalists - ethnicity- (though all the Arab people must be nationalists), we mean those who are concerned with their country’s problems and look for all the appropriate conditions to be conscious of their deep relationship with their nation and undertake this task. In the past, a Muslim was an Arab who had just converted to a new religion thanks to the all desirable conditions that it had embedded to make him understand that this religion was representative of Arabic nationalism for Arab unity and developing it’ (ibid., 127-128).

Aflaq was trying to prove that if a Muslim man (Muslim person), being Arab in the first place, had converted to Islam it was due to the fact that Islam represented “Arabic nationalist movement.” Today, every individual Arab needs to be a nationalist and believe in the question of nation. That is, the Arab nation has to change their past and history and demonstrate Ba’ath nationalism. According to this rational logic, Ba’ath ideology solves the question of Islam as a religion, the Arab as a nation and Ba’ath as a political party in two ways; firstly, directs the belief in Islam toward devotion to nationalism. Secondly, it dissolves Islam into Ba’ath’s Arabic nationalism. Ba’ath ideology aims to resolve the paradox that exists between nationalist and religious identity. In the past a Muslim was a person who had converted to the new religion, but today a Muslim must be a person who believes in nationalism in the first place in that nationalism represents the very thoughts and beliefs that the Prophet and the Arab represented at the time. Through eliminating the frontiers between the definitions of nationalism and religion, Pan-Arabism ideology turns nationalism into a value (al-Khalil 1991, 261).

Belief plays a key role here. Belief as a value-concept is a precondition for juxtaposing Islam and nationalism, and this describes truly the high goals of Ba'ath ideology. One can refer to Saddam Hussein who says: "when it comes to the Prophet Mohammad, one needs to consider him the prophet of humanity and nationalist hero of the great Arab nation, for many such great figures as the Prophet were born among the Arab" (Batatu 1978, 112-113).

Aflaq puts somewhere else "the Prophet's life is, in its absolute truth, indicative of Arabic spirit" (Aflaq 1975, 125). In other words, "for Mohammad the symbol of the Arab, so the whole Arab nation must be like him" (ibid., 125). What Aflaq wants to do is to emphasize the nationalistic aspect of the Prophet's character. He regards the Prophet as a nationalist hero who has emerged among the Arabs representing the Arabic spirit. Conversely, Pan-Arabism ideology (Ba'ath) represents the Arabic nationalism to the same extent.

Conclusion

On the whole, Islam is represented as the imaginary that seeks to bring back the grandeur of the Arab nation and attempts at providing identity for its ideological subject which is the so-called neo-fascist Pan-Arabism ideology. However, Ba'ath ideology is shown as the figurative that is based on extremist nationalism which reveals an ambivalent interpretation of Arabic ideology along with the imaginary. That is, Ba'ath ideology is both nationalistic and Islamic but the significant point lies in the privilege that is given to the significance of "nationalism" or "nation" over that of "Islam." It is in light of the significance of "Arabic nationalism" that the significance of "Islam" becomes meaningful. In summary, it can be said that if Arabic neo-fascism

is regarded through the lens of the “critique of ideology” theory, fascism in Arabic countries is bound up not only with nationalism but also with class and religious concepts. It is quite clear, by way of the semiotics of quotations from Michel Aflaq, which the significance of “Arabic religious nationalism” is amongst the priorities of this ideology that is stabilized and formulated around the massive significance of “the Arab nation.” Alternatively, it is the great significance of “the Arab nation” that formulates itself around the rest of the signifiers of this ideology, including religious nationalism. In such a way, Arabic neo-fascism ideology formulates itself around “religious nationalism” as one of its semantic elements.

References

- Aflaq, Michel. 1975. *On the Way of Resurrection*. Baghdad: Freedom Press.
- Althusser, Louis. 1999. *Selected Texts*. edited by Terry Eagleton. London: Longman.
- Eagleton, Terry. 1999. *Ideology*. London: Longman.
- Batatu, Hanna. 1978. *The Old Social Classes and Revolutionary Movement of Iraq: A study of Iraq's Old landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Ba'thists and Free Officers*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- al-Khalil, Samir. 1991. *Irak: La machine infernale*. Paris: Jean-Claude Lattes.
- Lacan, Jacques and David Macey. 1994. *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*. London: Penguin Books.
- Milner, Andrew and Jeff Browit. 2002. *Contemporary Cultural Theory: an introduction*. London: Routledge.
- Myers, Tony. 2004. *Slavoj Žižek*. London: Routledge.

- Suretsky, Harold. 1981. "The Concept of Ideology and Its Applicability to Law and Literature Studies.", *Legal Studies Forum* vol. 4 (3).
- Žižek, Slavoj. 1994, "The Spectre of Ideology" In *Mapping Ideology*. edited by Slavoj Žižek. London: Verso.
- . 2008. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso.