Islamism and nationalism are conventionally thought of as antithetical ideologies, yet there is in fact often a nationalistic dimension to Islamism. One is reminded of the distinction between Marxism and nationalism. In principle, Marxists condemn nationalism, as do Islamists. Yet the revolutions waged in the name of Marxist ideology since World War II were all fuelled by nationalist resentments of foreign domination. Such resentment, among other things, also fuelled the principal Islamist movements of the late 20th century. In both cases, an ostensibly universalistic ideology has actually often had a more parochial nationalist character in practice.

Religious and national identity tend to be fused in many parts of the world. One thinks, for example, of the linkage between Eastern Orthodox and Russian and Jewish national identity, between Hindu and Indian national identity. To be a Serb is to be Orthodox, to be a Croat is to be Catholic, and there is nothing to restrict Hindu nationalist at least, to be an Indian is to be Hindu. In all these cases, religion serves as a badge of national identity. This has also been true in the Islamic world. Arab nationalism in the 20th century usually had an implicitly Sunni Islamic hue to it. To be sure, Christians played a prominent role in creating the concept of Arab nationalism, based upon common language and culture rather than religion (a point invariably stressed by Islamist critics of nationalism). But the fact remains that in the popular imagination all over the Arab-speaking world, to be an Arab is to be a Muslim – a Sunni Muslim. Similarly, to be an Iranian, a ‘real’ one, is to be a Shi’ite. When the European empires subjugated the Islamic world in the 19th and early 20th centuries, anti-imperialist resistance was articulated in Islamic terms. Most Muslims thought of their wars against European imperialism as forms of jihad. The distinction between Muslim and infidel became intertwined with the distinction between the colonizer and the colonizer, the oppressed and the oppressor. Thus, traditional hostility toward the unbeliever qui-unbeliever was now infused with new meaning. This had unfortunate consequences for religious minorities in the Islamic world. Minorities were suspected of sympathizing with Christian Europe. Jews were suspected of sympathizing with Zionism and, after 1948, with Israel.

Secular nationalism did of course play an important role in the Middle East in the middle of the 20th century. One thinks, for example, of Mossadegh and the National Front in Iran, Nasser and ‘Nasserism’ in Egypt, and the emergence of the PLO among the Palestinians. But all these forms of nationalism eventually failed to produce liberation from foreign domination. And other social and economic problems found in most of the ‘Third World’. Moreover, all these forms of ‘secular’ nationalism were in fact imbued by Islam at the grassroots level. At the height of their power in the early 1950s, Mossadegh and the National Front depended on the support of the Ayatollah Khahani and the mullahs. Nasser may have opposed the Muslim Brotherhood’s goal of a strictly Islamic state, but his public persona was that of a Muslim fighting to free Muslims from Western imperialism. Had his brother-in-law Boutros Nasser never become Nasser. As for the Palestine Liberation Organization, its core group was al-Fatah, which always made extensive use of traditional Islamic concepts such as jihad and shahid, ‘martyr’. The more secular Marxist Palestinian movements led by the Western domination of the Islamic world as a whole and portray the emergence of nationalism as part of a Western and Jewish conspiracy to divide and conquer the Islamic world. Yet the rhetoric of these fiery critics of nationalism has often had a decidedly nationalistic ring to it.

In 1964, the Ayatollah Khomeini gave a speech in which he criticized the Iranian parliament, or Majlis, for passing a bill that would disfranchise the Iranian people from their right to vote. Khomeini’s words produced a stir in the Islamic world. Khomeini articulated resentment of foreign domination in an earthy, populist idiom that both an illiterate labourer and a well-educated secular nationalist could understand. Khomeini’s reference to ‘the Iranian people’ is quite striking given his condemnation of nationalism in his later writings. It must be recognized, however, that Khomeini often spoke of the Western domination of the Islamic world in general, not just Iran. In 1972, he declared:

‘Do you not know that this agreement reduces the Iranian people to a level lower than that of an American dog?’

If someone [an Iranian, that is] runs over an American dog with his car, he is subject to investigation and prosecution even if he is ‘the shah himself’. But if an American cook runs over ‘the shah of Iran’ himself, or any other important person, he will not be subject to prosecution.’

This statement articulates resentment of foreign domination in an earthly, populist idiom that both an illiterate labourer and a well-educated secular nationalist could understand. Khomeini’s reference to ‘the Iranian people’ is quite striking given his condemnation of nationalism in his later writings. It must be recognized, however, that Khomeini often spoke of the Western domination of the Islamic world in general, not just Iran. In 1972, he declared:

The phrase ‘Muslim people’ in this passage clearly refers primarily to the Palestinian people. And the phrase ‘a people’ was primarily on the liberation of Palestine. Hamas leaders and supporters do of course intend to go up the smallest piece of its homeland ‘shabi min watanihi’ that rejects Camp David, that rejects the international conference and a humiliating peace, that rejects imprisonment and banishment, that rejects capitulation of all kinds.’

The Oslo Accords of 1993, and the various agreements that followed them, created a plethora of ‘little’ reasoning that led to the Palestinian National Authority. To go from one such island to another entails humiliating interrogations and searches at Israeli checkpoints. When Israeli soldiers prevented him from traveling from Gaza to his home on the West Bank, Ahmad Qurei (‘Abu al-Ala), one of the principal negotiators of the Oslo Accords and president of the Palestinian parliament, declared: ‘Soon, I too will join Hamas.’ Qurei did not really mean this. But his words reflected the fury of a man outraged by the subjugation of his people. Such fury fuels Hamas.

Conclusion

It would be absurd to argue that nationalist resentment of foreign domination is the sole source of the appeal of Islamism. An adequate explanation of Islamism must also take into consideration the dire economic situation in much of the Islamic world. One must also recognize that many of the secular grievances that fuel Islamist movements also exist elsewhere in the Third World without resulting in the creation of militant religious revivalism. There are specific aspects of Islamic doctrine that encourage the emergence of such movements. Once must also recognize that Islamism is at least partially fueled by moral outrage provoked by the violation of traditional religious values. The outrage provoked by Salman Rushdie’s Satanic Verses cannot simply be attributed to resentment of Western domination or economic discontent. But while all these points are important, the fact remains that the Iranian revolution of 1978-79 was, among other things, a nationalist revolution. And Hamas is, among other things, a nationalist movement.

Henry Munson is professor of anthropology at the University of Maine, USA.
E-mail: henry_munson@umit.maine.edu