A perpetual identity crisis:
ISIS THROUGH ARAB EYES

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The way the Arab and Muslim people in the region react to the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) reveals the boundaries of the Islamic State (IS) identity formation. Even though ISIS aspires to supplant other religious, Arab and national identities, in reality the IS cannot unshackle itself from these identities.

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The emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), on the one hand, can be viewed as a symptom of the political chaos reigning in Iraq and Syria, which, exacerbating sectarian and ethnic divides, questions the sense of belonging to a national community. On the other hand, it may be considered a symptom and a reflection of the identity crisis in the region as a whole. The birth of the Islamic State (IS) was not only a result of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 or the Syrian civil war, but also a result of the failure of the Arab and Islamic identities in the region. All of which, in a way or another, failed to deliver the least of the demands they evangelized. The ideologues of Pan-Arabism and Arab nationalism resorted to oppressive and autocratic governance of the people in the name of anti-colonial struggle. In turn, IS is resorting to the same means in the name of Allah. This depicts not only a pattern of a common mode of governance but also common denominators that compose this identity.

The two common denominators in all this plethora of identities, including the one developed by IS, is the return to the "renaissance" of the Islamic or Arab golden era and the anti-colonial/Western struggle (now framed by IS as anti-crusader). It seems that this 'struggle' against the invaders, has been a main drive for various identity formations (justifiably so). Yet, the unbalanced prioritization of foreign affairs over the domestic ones battered these identities; especially, after the 1967 Arab defeat, creating a perpetual identity crisis ever since.

By the same token, the identity/ideology nexus of IS did not appear in a void, it may be argued that it nourished itself from the 'perpetual identity crisis' in the region. This crisis can be best illustrated by Emad Hajjaj, a popular cartoonist in Jordan, who drew a caricature depicting a truck, with the words *The Arab Nation* written across it, heading off a cliff. The truck carrying a dozen of fighters holding a black flag that says: *Mental Hospital of the Sunni, Shi'i, Jihadi, Naqshabandi, al-Qaedi, al-Nasiry, al-...*, while heads are rolling off the truck. This caricature summarizes the perplexity of the Arab and Muslim world facing the emergence of the IS. Yet while parts of the Muslim and Arab world, are petrified by the implications of the IS, others even among Hajjaj's compatriots, stage protests in support of ISIS calling for an extension of the 'Caliphate'. This is just one example of how polarized are the people in the region regarding ISIS.

Furthermore, the perplexity and confusion, caused by the emergence of ISIS, is evident in the way the people in the region react to it and reveal the boundaries of the IS identity formation. The reaction against the IS reveals three integral elements of the various aspects of identity formation in the modern history of the region; namely, the religious, the Arab and the national. More particularly, in terms of the religious aspect, the reactions refer to the de-legitimization of the theological dogma of the IS both on an intellectual (institutionalized) and popular level. For example, *The Open Letter to al-Baghdadi*,[1] signed by 126 Sunni Islamic scholars (including one Saudi Imam), gives an analytical and profound counter narrative of the IS practices using Sunni Islamic textual proof (both in Arabic and English). This is undoubtedly the first attempt in such a grand scale.[2] Furthermore, this was supported on a popular level via the social media campaign #NotInMyName (mainly among Sunnis) to condemn ISIS on the ground that it misinterprets Islam.[3]

The reaction against the IS goes beyond the religious aspect, mobilizing the Arab identity to counteract the fear, but also the ideological appeal, of the IS. This second dimension of identity is in question, not only due to the large recruitment of foreign fighters, but also because ISIS seems to have emerged from the rubbles of the Arab national ideology that failed to consolidate a solid Arab identity. According to Ghassan al Imam, a (secular) Syrian writer, it was the limited rhetoric of the Arab regimes that replaced the notion of the 'Arab nation' with the one of the 'Arab people', which led to 'social disruption, sectarian infighting, and the emergence of sectarian groups similar to ISIS'.[4] Advocates of such conceptualization fail to underline the grievances that these regimes caused as they fostered –directly or indirectly- the radicalization of such Islamist groups. Surprisingly, the aforementioned writer does not view ISIS as a 'serious threat to Arab states' political systems', as it only appeals to 'parts of society that lack political awareness and tools to process and analyze information'.[5] This condescending

stance has two implications; first, it indicates that the popularity of ISIS is amongst injudicious people that lack political understanding and accordingly, conceals and disregards the political nature of the IS.

At the same time, such conceptualization of Arab nationalism fails to underline that the conveyors of Arab nationalism such as Saddam Hussein and Hafez Al-Assad have been central to the nationalization (the division of Ba'ath in Iraqi and Syrian branches) and sectarianization (the former by creating a Sunni-Tikriti- based regime, and the latter, an Alawite one) of Arab identity. This trend was further sustained by Nouri al-Maliki's and Bashar Al-Assad's rule along sectarian lines.

The same contradiction between inclusive ideology and divisive, in terms ethnicity and sect, is evident in the IS. Thus, although the IS propagates the immediate materialization of the utopic Islamic Caliphate, reminiscing of the Islamic golden era, it is believed that the newcomers –especially the foreign ones- usually are directed towards Syrian territory rather than Iraqi. This occurs not only because of 'the deep fragmentation of Syrian *rebel society*, which has weakened its ability to resist penetration and domination by small contingents of determined foreign fighters', but also because the 'social base of Iraq's Sunni insurgency is considerably more cohesive' and apparently, the IS wants to keep it this way.[6] The fact that in Iraq the leadership is composed of Iraqi, while in Syria it is open to other nationalities, echoes a double-standard which clashes with the IS's identity which is allegedly all-inclusive, nationless, multi-racial and egalitarian (excluding, of course, the slave girls).[7]

Another aspect of the reaction against ISIS goes beyond religious, Arab and national identity and attempts to detach the emergence of ISIS from the Arab culpability. Instead, this type of reaction traces the culprits in the face of outsiders; namely CIA and Israel. For instance, the Iraqiya state TV broadcasts a short trailer,[8] which ridicules the people of Daesh[9] but most importantly implies that Daesh was created by the CIA and Israel. Another example that further echoes such allegations is the political satire show, Watan a Watar, Falestiniya TV.[10] In a video, Daesh is presented as indiscriminately violent to random by-passers; only until an Israeli comes along, to whom the Daesh fighter tells him, 'you are welcome'. This widely held belief disguises, as best explained by Hisham Maleh, the fact that the usual 'enemy' – that justifiably has the 'imperialist, Zionist, [and] Soviet' faces- is now *our own*.[11] Yet for the people in the region, it seems to be hard to see the enemy, beyond the 'usual suspects' of Imperialism and Zionism. In other words, the Arab population refuses to see that it was not only the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and its aftermath, but also the Arab leaders such as (Saddam Hussein, Nouri al-Maliki and Bashar al-Assad) are responsible for the rise of ISIS.

In conclusion, even though the 'perpetual identity crisis' in the region allowed the emergence of the IS, the reaction of the people in the region and the contradictions within the IS, demonstrate that the latter has not supplanted the other identities. At the same time, the contradictions within ISIS reveal that its identity is confined, as it has inherited the flaws of the other identities in the region. Whether these common denominators will also be the IS Achilles' heel, remains to be seen.

R E F E R E N C E S

All links accessed on October 10, 2014

1.   Official Website, Open Letter to Al-Baghdadi, http://lettertobaghdadi.com/index.php

2.   Previous attempts in regards to terrorism and particularly against al-Qaeda can be seen here: The American Muslim, (20/06/2014) http://theamericanmuslim.org/tam.php/features/articles/muslim_voices_against_extremism_and_terrorism_part_i_fatwas/

3.   Yet this caused a counter campaign #MuslimApologies as a reaction by Muslims across the globe complaining that they have been under constant pressure to justify their religion.

4.   Al Imam, Ghassan, "ISIS and Arab Unity", Asharq al-Aqsat, (10/09/2014) http://www.aawsat.net/2014/09/article55336421

5.   Ibid.

6.   Sayigh, Yezid, "ISIS: Global Islamic Caliphate or Islamic Mini-State in Iraq", SADA, (24/06/2014) http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/07/24/isis-global-islamic-caliphate-or-islamic-state-in-iraq/hhww

7.   MEMRITVVideos, "British Islamist Abu Baraa in Support of ISIS: We can start Having slave Girls again", (13/10/2014) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FSzaPNw_AjY&index=4&list=UUpBvIBfZ-foo5ZbLH5O0N4g

8.   Karim, Ammar, "Baghdad steps up propaganda fight against IS with TV series that includes cowboys and a Jewish princess", Your Middle East, (29/09/2014) http://www.yourmiddleeast.com/culture/baghdad-steps-up-propaganda-fight-against-is-with-tv-series-that-includes-cowboys-and-a-jewish-princess_26923

9.   Daesh is the Arabic acronym of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) as referred to in the region. There is nothing derogatory in the actual term itself, other than the intention of the people that use it instead of IS, as used by its supporters across the region.

10.   Watan A Watar, "Daesh", (29/06/2014) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D-GtD3Ahv9I&feature=youtu.be

11.   Melhem, Hisham, "The Barbarians within our Gates", PoliticoMagazine, (18/09/2014) http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/09/the-barbarians-within-our-gates-111116.html#ixzz3EoVCmCYi