

## **Nationalism, Language, and Muslim Exceptionalism**

*Tristan James Mabry*

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Tristan James Mabry's research investigates whether Muslim populations are exceptionally resistant to ethnonationalism, which he assumes to be more conducive to a liberal democratic form of government than any concept of community defined in terms of a shared religion. He concludes that Muslims are not immune to it, and that the determining factor in whether a Muslim community will organize itself according to ethnonationalism instead of Islamism – Mabry apparently considers these the only modes worth mentioning – is whether they develop a print culture in their local vernacular. Ultimately, the author concludes that nationalism founded upon ethnic solidarity is inherently superior to alternative sociopolitical models, and therefore advocates promoting local ethnonationalisms as a strategy to prevent Muslims from organizing themselves in terms of shared religious identity (p. 202).

In the introduction, Mabry situates his argument in relation to Ernest Gellner's theories about the potentials of Muslim nationalism, Steven Fish's statistical study of Muslim distinctiveness, Benedict Anderson's idea of an imagined

community, and Bernard Lewis's monolithic imagining of Muslims and Arabs. Mabry questions the definitions of such terms as *ethnicity*, *nationalism*, and *Muslim* and describes his research on minority separatist groups to highlight relationships between these concepts. His second chapter, "Muslim Nations," investigates nationalism and the role of a shared or sacred language in its development. He concludes that "Muslim minorities, especially when endowed with their own print culture, seek autonomy or independence in the same manner as ethnic minorities protecting a unique culture" (p. 32).

In the third chapter, "National Tongues," and fourth chapter, "Modern Standard Arabs," the author complicates the topic of ethnolinguistic nationalism by arguing that Arabic is not really one language, but rather "34 living vernaculars" (p. 60). At this point, his writing adopts a politically active stance by advocating that a print culture in each vernacular be encouraged because it is "a necessary condition for a strong ethnonational identity, and therefore is critical to contain alternate political identities, including but not limited to Islamic fundamentalism" (p. 34). He includes several tables of demographic data about Arab states with special attention to literacy and regional vernaculars. Based upon that data, Mabry argues that Arab states may be sovereign but are illegitimate "because the doctrine of national self-determination requires that the limits of the nation be coterminous with the state" (pp. 82-83). He argues that maintaining Modern Standard Arabic as the state language when most of the population is literate only in a vernacular is a means to "suppress ethnolinguistic nationalism" and thus to "suppress democracy" (p. 84). The implied remedy is to redraw state borders in order to create separate nation-states for each of the 34 "demotic" Arabic-speaking populations he imagines as separate ethnic-nations.

Chapters 5 through 10 summarize the regional case studies through which Mabry developed his thesis: chapter 5, "Tongue Ties: The Kurds of Iraq"; chapter 6, "Natives of the 'New Frontier': The Uyghurs of Xinjiang"; chapter 7, "Print Culture and Protest: The Sindhis of Pakistan"; chapter 8, "Speaking to the Nation: The Kashmiris of India"; chapter 9, "From Nationalism to Islamism: The Acehnese of Indonesia"; and chapter 10, "Religious Community versus Ethnic Diversity: The Moros of the Philippines." Each chapter provides demographic data, a discussion of the region's languages, and a survey of historical or active political movements and organizations.

All but one of these chapters includes a section ostensibly about "Islam in..." the region; however, Islam is only presented through the statements of politicians or because of its relevance to a group Mabry identifies as an "Islamist organization," "transnational jihadi organization like Al-Qaeda," or "a rebel group, a terrorist network, or a nascent political party" (p. 189).

Any discussion of Islam as a religion or its regional variations in terms of expression is either superficial or conspicuously absent. For example, he briefly mentions that unlike their mostly Hanafi Arab neighbors, Kurds tend to be Shafi‘is. But instead of explaining why or even if this is important, he quickly shifts to a history of Kurdish militant groups (p. 98). Readers seeking details about Islam in these regions will be disappointed, but those interested in a modern history of regional political movements will find the chapters informative.

In the concluding chapter, “Nationalism, Language, and Islam,” Mabry reiterates his thesis that “Muslims are not exceptionally resistant to the most common form of nationalism, which is typically secular and based on a shared and distinct ethnolinguistic culture” (p. 197) as a basis for several policy recommendations. Despite frequently raising the specter of “Islamic fundamentalism” as the supposed diametrical opposite of nationalism (and democracy), he uses the term interchangeably with both “Islamism” (an “opportunistic infection”; p. 209) and “Islam” (dismissed as “a mystical distraction,” p. 201). For example, he considers the question of whether Kurds are “more or less likely to harbor elements of fundamentalist Islam” to be “the corollary” to whether they are “observant” or “pious Muslims” (p. 98) and conflates religiosity with fundamentalism by arguing that “for Islamic fundamentalists everything must be measured vis-à-vis Islam” (p. 207).

Alarming, Mabry’s political agenda exhibits the same binary “cosmic war” thinking he ascribes to fundamentalists (p. 199). While he condemns religious fundamentalists for their willingness to “to die for the divine, to expire as a martyr,” he simultaneously asserts that it is “conventionally honorable” and a means to “a kind of immortality” for a patriot “to selflessly sacrifice for the good of something far greater than oneself” and die “for ‘God and country’” (p. 200). In other words, violence is praiseworthy as long it is undertaken in the interest of ethnonationalism, the transcendental ideology he prefers, but not in the interests of the “religious” ideals of “fundamentalists.”

Despite critiquing Lewis as an author “who compulsively lumps all Muslims – Arab and non-Arab – under a single banner” (p. 77), the author nowhere demonstrates even a cursory understanding of Islam as a religion, nor does he appear to be aware of the diverse political theories inspired by Islamic thought. Thus, his championing of ethnonationalism over “Islamism” is little more than a quixotic struggle against an imaginary enemy.

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