

Relevance of Nationalism and Identity Building in Current Era

Farinaz Aryanfar

Abstract

The rise of the far-right parties in the executive power of west European countries in the last few decade, and their anti-migrant or anti-Muslim public agendas is remarkable. These agendas then will partly form the national security discourses and change the identity building within these countries. Whether these new security discourses will then be actually helpful to secure these countries or will work reversely is the question. This paper will thus be looking at the question 'to what extent are nationalism and a national narrative useful in securing a nation from external / internal threats?' In order to do that I will conceptualize the term nationalism by using secondary data. A combination of different empirical researches that have already been conducted are collected, in order to form a new hypothesis about nationalism. This paper is thus a theoretical analysis, rather than an empirical research paper.

Keywords: nationalism, security, state, identity, ontological security, Islamophobia.

Introduction

In the last decade, we have seen politicians in parts of West-Europe and United States try to exclude Muslims from the national identity narratives. Examples include an interview with Geert Wilders – the chair of the PVV (Freedom Party in the Netherlands) – after the Paris attacks in 2015 (De Telegraaf, 2015) and another interview with the Times (Bruno Waterfield, the Times, 2016), in which he stated that Europe and the Netherlands should be de-Islamized because Islam is an 'imported monster'; Sweden's Democrat's chair, Jimmie Åkesson's opinion piece in 2009 about how Islam is ruining the Swedish and European culture (Åkesson, 2009); and president Trump's executive order that closed the United States' border for the seven majority Muslim countries, that included American permanent residents (The Guardian, 2017). There are studies that show that

the anti-Muslim rhetoric has fueled Islamophobia, as well as discrimination based on Islamic-appearances, around Europe as well as the United States (Perry 2013, Awan and Zempi 2015, Awan 2016, Bayrakli and Hafez 2015). The Islamophobic rhetoric used by the politicians is becoming a part of these states' security narratives and can eventually lead to polarization and internal conflict in these states.

Polarization and internal conflict can thus occur, despite the fact that the initial use of these discourses is to form a national narrative in order to fight a threat of some kind against the country; in the Sweden's Democrats' case it is fighting extremism, a segregated society, and defending the Swedish culture and standard values against the 'invading Muslim / immigrant culture' (Iconic, YouTube, 2016). In the case of the Netherlands' Geert Wilders, it is securing the 'freedom' and 'safety' of the Netherlands against the Islamic ideology, which according to him is against these values as well as against democracy (NOS, 2016). In the case of president Trump's order, it is in order to 'keep the Americans safe' from 'terrorism' (The White House, 2017). Therefore, these proceedings lead to the question whether having a national identity which is formed by the national narrative and discourses, is useful in securing a nation.

While the initial reason for forming the national narrative is to secure the country against outside threats, we see in the previously mentioned examples that the internal citizens that follow Islam as their religion also get discriminated through these national narratives and discourses. This paper will thus be looking at the question 'to what extent are nationalism and a national narrative useful in securing a nation from external / internal threats?' In order to do that we will first conceptualize the term nationalism by using secondary data. A combination of different empirical researches that have already been conducted will be collected, in order to form a new hypothesis about nationalism.

Theoretical Discussion and Analysis

Let us first explain what nationalism is and whether far-right parties such as the Dutch PVV, the Sweden's Democrats, and Trump's anti-Muslim policies belong within any of the nationalistic groupings. After this, we will examine what part identity plays within nationalism. This will bring us to the dilemma that nationalism is facing during the current era; that is, the exclusion of a particular group of citizens from the nationality narrative, which will alienate them from the feeling of belonging to the nation.

Nationalism is a shared sense of identity based on shared sources such as ethnicity, language, religion, culture, history, and geographical proximity and a political aspiration (Kassem, Talbott, and Snarr 2012, 37; Mendieta 2003, 408; Taylor 1989, 27). These shared sources generate a shared feeling of belonging to a certain group (ibid). When this shared feeling becomes a political goal to self-determination and control over a certain territory, it is called nationalism (Kassem, Talbott, and Snarr 2012, 37-38).

There are different kinds of nationalism: civic nationalism versus ethnic nationalism, and pro-state nationalism versus anti-state nationalism (Kassem, Talbott and Snarr 2012, 43-44; Smith 1991; Greenfeld 1993). Civic nationalism is based on citizenship rather than ethnicity, and its main principle of unity is based on civil rights and legal codes for all members of the society regardless of their ethnicity or race. However, ethnic nationalism is based on ethnicity where the main elements are the native history, a collective memory, common language and values, shared religion, myth, symbolism, all of which are considered unique to the group.

Others see nationalism as either pro-state and supportive of the existing government (pro-state nationalism), or rather opposed to the official nationalism of the state (anti-state nationalism). Many scholars (Smith 1991, 6-9, 100; Kassem, Talbott and Snarr 2012, 37) claim that civic nationalism is predominantly a Western conception of nation while ethnic nationalism is an Eastern European, Asian, African, and Latin American conception of nation. It is argued that this can be found within the history of these countries; Western European countries have gone through the period of enlightenment, which had

the value 'equality' at its core. Furthermore, the whole idea that people can become part of a nation and change nationality is based on the civic nationalism, while it is not possible to become part of an ethnic nationality, as people are born within this sort of nationality. However, these far-right parties are using arguments from ethnic nationalism within their civic nation-states.

While Netherlands, Sweden, and especially the United-States are civic nationalities where one can obtain the nationality of these countries through accepting the civil rights and legal codes, these parties talk about finding the core values of being a Dutch, a Swede or an American, making it about having a particular religion or being part of a particular race instead. These kinds of discourses belong to the ethnic nationalism instead of the civic nationalism.

Furthermore, nationalism is about power and controlling a state: one of the reasons why nationalism emerges, is to maintain the integrity of a sovereign country (Breuilly, 1993). While maintaining the integrity of the sovereign country is called physical security, a state also needs ontological security (Mitzen, 2006, p. 342). Ontological security, according to Mitzen, is a terminology rooted in psychology that refers to the subjective sense of who one is and that which motivates actions (ibid., 344).

In international relations, ontological security refers to the state's identity, how a state defines itself and how it separates itself from other states, as well as how it wants to be seen by others (Steele, 2008, pp. 1-3), which happens through maintaining a national-narrative (ibid., 3). In order for a state to separate itself from other states, it needs to be exclusive and needs to use a (security) narrative where there is a distinction between 'us' and 'them' (Stern, 2006).

In David Campbell's words (1998), one of the unifying tools of a collective is to create an external threat. The (security) narrative is thus socially constructed and has a 'reality-making' effect (Jackson R., 2005, p. 148). An example is how the Iraqi invasion of Iran in 1980 was not perceived as a security threat to the United States, but Iraq's war with Kuwait in 1990 was. The security narrative is that what separates 'us' from 'them'. Thus

nationalism is exclusive; that is, it excludes members that are not part of the nation (Kassem, Talbott, & Snarr, 2012, p. 37), in order to make a distinctive 'self'.

Furthermore, ontological security is thus very much in correlation with the state's identity since there is an 'us' in the making through the discourses made by politicians that needs to secure itself from the 'others' or 'them' (Stern 2006, 187). This 'us' and 'them' dichotomy is seen in the 'war of terror' discourse used by the Bush administration (Jackson R. , 2005) as well as media's misrepresentation of Muslims (Pop 2016, L. Jackson 2010, Dixon and Williams 2015, Harris 2009).

However, as Maria Stern puts it, 'it is not possible to make a perfect all-encompassing narrative. The trick is to find the most real representation of the people' (Stern, 2006, p. 200). When being Muslim is used as a factor of being part of 'them' instead of 'us', a factor that separates who belongs to our nation and who does not, Muslims within these nations are also being alienated. This kind of discourse excludes part of the nation itself, while the whole point of making a security narrative is to unite the nation against some evil threat from outside. The narrative thus seem to collapse, since it starts to attack a group of its own citizens – which will eventually lead to polarization.

Many scientists believe that polarized countries have a higher risk of civil war than non-polarized countries (Elbadawi, 1999) (Elbadawi & Sambanis, 2000). Therefore, nationalism in the form of using a security narrative to exclude Muslims from the nation-state, is not only alienating part of the society but can also lead to polarization, internal civil conflicts, an in its most extreme case, to civil war. This means that a security narrative which was meant to unite the country, is rather segmenting the country, thereby leading it to conflict.

In all likelihood, one of the causes behind this problem is that ethnic nationalism was historically meant for a time when people inside the physical borders of a country were more or less similar. In the Netherlands, for example, when the United Netherlands was built and the South Netherlands (current Belgium) and the Northern Netherlands were united, the population all spoke the same language. When the two countries separated, it was because the Southern part could

speak French – which was then an elite quality – and wanted to separate itself from the Northern Dutch that only spoke Flemish.

However, it seems these distinctions were clearer back then, and that is how it was possible to create such ethnic nationalities based on language or religion; Northern were Protestants while the Southerners were Catholics.

In the current globalized world that we live in, where immigration is much more standardized than back in the nineteenth century, where Middle Class people can reach different parts of the world with only a few ours travel time; where within seconds news around the world can be reached through television and internet; where nations are more multicultural, it is not easy to find a security narrative based on ethnicity that can represent the people of a country.

Therefore, nationalism needs to be based on civic nationalism – not only in name but also in practice and discourse – and not on ethnic nationalism.

Conclusion

While national identity is a crucial factor for the integrity and amalgamation of sovereign countries, globalization has given rise to challenges in finding the right narrative and discourse to identify an 'us' to secure from outside threats.

Concluding, state identity dichotomies are needed in order to have ontological security. However, because of globalization, many people can travel into different countries, and countries are not merely made of one particular religious group or ethnicity. Therefore, these dichotomies can become too simplified and superficial, not taking into account that the profiling also encompasses a part of the population that lives inside the nation.

This leads to security threats within the country in the form of polarization and conflict, instead of the unity that the 'us' and 'them' dichotomy is supposed to bring forth. This will then distance different groups inside a state and, in the worst cases, to civil wars.

Bibliography

- Åkesson, J. (2009, October 19). Åkesson: Muslimerna är vårt största utländska hot. Retrieved December 10, 2016, from <http://www.aftonbladet.se/debatt/debattamnen/politik/article12049791.ab>
- Awan, I. (2016). Cyber-Islamophobia and Internet Hate Crime. In I. Awan, *Islamophobia in Cyberspace: Hate Crimes Go Viral* (pp. 7-39). New York: Routledge.
- Awan, I., & Zempi, I. (2015, October). We Fear for our Lives: Offline and Online Experiences of Anti-Muslim Hostility. Retrieved December 10, 2016, from <https://www.tellmamauk.org/wp-content/uploads/resources/We%20Fear%20For%20Our%20Lives.pdf>
- Bayrakli, E., & Hafez, F. (2015). *European Islamophobia Report*. Istanbul: SETA.
- Breuilly, J. (1993). *Nationalism and the State*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Bruno Waterfield, the Times. (2016, July 26). Islam now a monster in our midst, claims Geert Wilders. Retrieved December 10, 2016, from <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/islam-now-a-monster-in-our-midst-claims-geert-wilders-mv3x2l60x>
- Campbell, D. (1998). *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- De Telegraaf. (2015, November 16). Bijna elke terrorist is moslim. Retrieved December 10, 2016, from http://www.telegraaf.nl/binnenland/24746582/___Bijna_elke_terrorist_is_moslim___.html
- Dixon, T., & Williams, C. (2015). The Changing Misrepresentation of Race and Crime on Network and Cable News. *Journal of Communication* 65(1), 24-39.
- Elbadawi, I. (1999). *Civil Wars and Poverty: The Role of External Interventions, Political Rights and Economic Growth*. World Bank's Conference on "Civil Conflicts, Crime and Violence". Washington, DC.: World Bank.
- Elbadawi, I., & Sambanis, N. (2000). Why are there so many Civil Wars in Africa? Understanding and Preventing Violent Conflict. *Journal of African Economies* 9(3), 244-269.
- Greenfeld, L. (1993). *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Harris, R. (2009). *A cognitive psychology of mass communication*. New York: Routledge.
- Iconic, YouTube. (2016, June 15). Jimmie Åkesson Sweden Democrats (SD) ENG. Retrieved December 10, 2016, from <https://youtu.be/LkepEmenioo>
- Jackson, L. (2010). Images of Islam in US Media and their Educational Implications. *Educational Studies* 46(1), 3-24.
- Jackson, R. (2005). Security, Democracy, and the Rhetoric of Counter-Terrorism. *Democracy and Security* 1, 147-171.
- Kassem, L., Talbott, A., & Snarr, M. (2012). Nationalism. In M. Snarr, & D. Snarr, *Introducing Global Issues* (pp. 37-58). London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Mendieta, E. (2003). Afterword: Identities - Postcolonial and Global. In L. Alcoff, & E. Mendieta, *Identities: Race, Class, Gender, and Nationality* (pp. 407-417). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Mitzen, J. (2006). Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and Security Dilemma. *European Journal of International Relations* 12 (3), 341-370.
- NOS . (2016, February 22). Wilders: geen concessies over terugdringen islam. Retrieved December 10, 2016, from <http://nos.nl/artikel/2088385-wilders-geen-concessies-over-terugdringen-islam.html>
- Perry, B. (2013). Gendered Islamophobia: hate crime against Muslim women. *Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture* 20:1, 74-89.
- Pop, D. (2016). Misrepresentation of muslims and islamophobic public discourses in recent Romanian

media narratives. *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 15(44), 33-51.

Smith, A. (1991). *National Identity*. London & New York: Penguin.

Steele, B. (2008). *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self Identity and the IR State*. Oxon & New York: Routledge.

Stern, M. (2006). 'We' the Subject: the Power and Failure of (In)Security. *Security Dialogue* 37(2), 187-205.

Taylor, C. (1989). *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The Guardian. (2017, January 28). Donald Trump anti-refugee order: 'green-card holders included in ban' – as it happened. Retrieved February 1, 2017, from <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/live/2017/jan/28/world-digests-donald-trumps-order-to-ban-refugees-from-muslim-countries>

The White House. (2017, January 27). Executive Order: Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United-States. Retrieved January 31, 2017, from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/01/27/executive-order-protecting-nation-foreign-terrorist-entry-united-states>

Title: Relevance of Nationalism and Identity Building in Current Era

Author: Farinaz Aryanfar