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Does “Citizenship” Have Meaning in Islam? [ON LANGUAGE]

The pragmatic *Yusuf al-Qaradawi* has been known for original views on the interpretation of Muslim principles with the goal of resolving conflicts between Muslims and non-Muslims. Although these new perspectives do not necessarily translate into changes in positions, analysts nevertheless view them as challenging and having a positive effect on his mostly Muslim audience. This article analyzes his latest attempt at such linguistic deconstruction.



Ahl al-dhimma is a term applied to all non-Muslim subjects of a country governed in accordance with *Shari'a* laws. The term connotes an expectation of subservient behavior by these non-Muslims and is used derogatorily by fundamentalists when referring to Christians and Jews. Although the practice is no longer followed, *dhimmi*s were supposed to be granted *dhimma* (protection) by their Muslim rulers in return for paying a *jizya* (tribute) and acknowledging Muslim superiority.

Qaradawi's seeks to eliminate the term *ahl al-dhimma* from the Islamic vocabulary. He considers the term to be “a historical expression that is no longer adaptable to modern discourse.” He advocates use of the neutral term “*ahl al-dar*” to refer to non-Muslims residing in countries governed by Muslims. “*Ahl al-dar*” means “people of the house.” Although this term basically means “residents,” *Qaradawi* reminds us, indirectly, that the “house” referenced in the phrase is that of *dar al-Islam*, i.e., “the house of Islam.”¹ Thus, non-Muslims would essentially come under the Islamic umbrella.

It becomes apparent, however, that not all of *Qaradawi's* objectives in promoting linguistic change are benign. Non-Muslims have been relying on western principles of citizenship to advocate for equality for all citizens under the law. According to *Qaradawi*, the term “citizen” in all its forms is at odds with Muslim teachings and offensive to Muslim sensitivities because it implies an abandonment of an Islamic identity for a secular one. In lieu of “citizen,” *Qaradawi* suggests the word “brother” which is commonly used by Muslims to identify another person of the same faith. Knowing that he would be strenuously opposed by fundamentalists who reject extending the use of the term “brother” beyond the Muslim community, *Qaradawi* relies on the semantic association of the word with the family, tribe and nation. He also relies on several *Qur'anic* verses where the term is used to refer to the Jews. He thereby makes the case that the word “brotherhood” is not restricted to the religious domain, but rather can be applied to various situations wherever a bond exists among people, including “brotherly nationalism.” To illustrate, *Qaradawi* states that he has no problem in referring to the Christians of Egypt as “our Coptic brothers.” Moreover, to soothe the apprehension of non-Muslims, *Qaradawi* emphasizes that the term “brotherhood” implies, among other things, equality for all.

Qaradawi warns, however, that nationalistic tendencies can become a problem whenever they are in conflict with religious principles, or entirely secular or fanatic in nature. *Qaradawi* argues that Islam rejects fanaticism in all its forms, and that nationalistic attitudes must always yield to religion whenever a conflict arises.

¹ literally *house of Peace* is the term used to refer to those lands under Islamic rule

Understanding the power of the language, *Qaradawi* attempts what appears, at first blush, to be a rapprochement between Muslims and non-Muslims. However, discontinuing use of the expression “*ahl al-dhimma*,” which had already lost its meaning over the years, would come at a high price – elimination of the notion of “citizenship.” Labeling non-Muslims and Muslims alike as “brothers” serves *Qaradawi* on two levels. It generalizes the word to such an extent (he himself states that we are all somehow brothers in “the human race”) that it becomes meaningless for purposes of self-identity, but at the same time brings non-Muslims living in Muslim countries within the fold of Islam.

From the Western point of view, if *Qaradawi* manages to get more Muslims to call non-Muslims “brothers” rather than “enemies,” it will be a welcome change, regardless of his motives. As for *Qaradawi*’s goal of eliminating nationalistic tendencies, there is little doubt that this is not about to happen anytime soon in Muslim societies. Just look at the Turks, Palestinians and Iranians. The trend in the Middle East is not toward an expansive view of the world, but rather toward a narrower one. If nationalism is losing ground, it is not in favor of the greater *Ummah*. Rather, national identity is giving way to the rise of sectarian crises in Iraq and the Sudan and even tribal fanaticism in Saudi Arabia.

On Language:

Out: *ahl al-dhimma*: [protected people]

watan, wataniyyah, muwatin, muwatanah : [homeland or nation, nationalism, citizen or national, citizenship]

IN: ahl al-dar: [household people]

Al-ukhuwwa, al-ukhuwwah al-wataniyyah: [brotherhood or brotherliness, nationalistic brotherhood]

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