

Sunni Kurds Rightly Suspicious Of Sunni Arabs

Perhaps you have noticed that the thousands of reports on the Islamic State, and on Kobane, refer to the Kurds, but never bother to mention whether the Kurdes are Sunni or Shi'a, or why that might matter, for such mention would lead to further question. So let's answer that question: Most, though not all, Kurds are Sunni. Why then, do the Sunnis of the Islamic State treat the Kurds, all of them, with such ferocity, and why do the Kurds, so many of them being Sunnis, remain apparently unlured by the siren song of the "Caliphate" when so many of the Sunni Arabs, at least before they got a sufficient dose of the Islamic State, not fight against, but embrace the Islamic State? Surely it is in the raising of such questions, and in seeking to provide the answers, that a journalist fulfills his true function, which is not merely to report facts, but to make sense of them.

One of Professor Bernard Lewis's most useful books is "The Multiple Identities of the Middle East." Religion, Lewis explained, was one part of the identity; another was ethnicity; a third, much weaker than the other two, and of significance only in a few countries, was the sense of belonging to a particular nation, inhabited by a particular people, with a long history. The great religious dividing line in the Middle East is that between Muslims and non-Muslims; a secondary one is that which divides Sunni Muslims from Shi'a Muslims. The great ethnic divide is between Arabs and non-Arabs, and the growing recognition, by the latter, that their mistreatment, of all kinds (linguistic and cultural repression, economic discrimination, political impotence) at the hands of the Arabs, has something to do with Islam, which in many ways is and has always been a vehicle for Arab supremacism. And while the nation-state is a European idea,

one alien to Muslims, who naturally find their solidarity with fellow members of the Umma, the world-wide Community of Believers, there are two mainly-Muslim countries, Egypt and Iran, with a sufficiently long history and self-consciousness, with much of that history predating the arrival of Islam, and with monuments from that pre-Islamic past that are impossible, in their size and significance – the Pyramids in Egypt, the ruins of Persepolis in Iran – to ignore or dismiss.

Most Kurds may be Sunni, but the Kurdish identity has finally become as, or perhaps even more, important than the Islamic identity. That has happened because the Kurds have understood, after the mass killings (182,000 Kurds were killed, some by poison gas as at Halabja) by the Arabs of Iraq, with no Arabs elsewhere expressing the slightest dismay (a silence that Kanan Makiya noted but, apparently unwilling to recognize the indifference of the Arabs to non-Arab Muslims, unless those non-Arab Muslims were fighting non-Muslims, found himself unable to provide an explanation rooted in Arab supremacism, and in its source and permanent support, Islam).