



Identity and Conflict in the Sahel: Contrasting Interpretations of War and Peace

Boumediene BOUZID
University of Oran, Algeria

There is a fluctuating relationship existing in Arab societies between conflict about identity on one hand and the social and political protests on the other. The strife for political power by certain groups points out to a sectarian dimension and at times intentional. The game of identity in conflicts is played out based on language, religion, ethnicity or certain cultural specificity. All that is utilized as symbolic “capital” and a weapon to bring together clusters of parties or social groups to confront the reigning political authority. In Algeria of the 1990s, for example, violence erupted to reflect a conflict between an authority that inherited a revolutionary legitimacy and a populist force found in Islam to confront the statist power. The state remained captive to a past revolutionary legitimacy that turned into a cultural and psychological indoctrination, establishing its “sacredness” through a demagogic discourse.

An issue has surfaced on the interpretation of whether it is Islam or Arabism that possesses the identity or the “right in interpreting the identity.” This background has contributed to the atmosphere of war in the Sahel. However, the character of the war in the African Sahel is linked to a financial dimension of smuggling and drugs in addition to the “demands” for political rights by the people of northern Mali because they belong to the Tuareq people who differ ethnically and religiously from Southern Mali. Today, the question is how we can turn the cultural specificity into a factor of peace and stability in a society that suffers from oppression, absence of social justice and backwardness.

The following ways are suggested;

- The prevention of approving “specificity” at legal and partisan levels as a political and electoral program.
- Recognizing, on the other hand, these cultural specificities where governments must take into consideration cultural and social development such as the teaching of marginalized languages and religions. The spread of a new knowledge and awareness about the understanding and interpretation of cultural specificity is necessary in order to serve the values of peace, communication and love.