

The Role of Islam in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a part of the greater Arab-Israeli conflict, is an ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestinians.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is by no means a simple two-sided conflict with all Israelis (or even all Israeli Jews) sharing one point of view and all Palestinians another. In both communities, there are individuals and groups who advocate total territorial removal of the other community, those who advocate a two-state solution, and those who advocate a bi-national solution of a single secular state encompassing present-day Israel and the Gaza strip and the West Bank.

Since the Oslo Accord, the governments of Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) have been officially committed to an eventual two-state solution.

People who sympathize with Palestinians tend to view the conflict as an illegitimate military occupation of Palestine, supported with military and diplomatic assistance from the U.S. Many tend to view the armed Palestinian resistance within the West Bank and Gaza Strip as a right granted by the Geneva conventions and the United Nations Charter, and some extend this view to attacks within Israel proper.

Those sympathetic to Israel tend to view the conflict as a campaign of terrorism perpetrated by Palestinian groups such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Fatah and others, and supported by other states in the region and the majority of the Palestinian people. Many tend to believe that the occupation is necessary for the security of Israel. This sharp contrast of views on the nature of the conflict has been a key obstacle to resolution.

Many wonder whether the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict is an Ancient Ethnic/Religious Rivalry or not.

- Despite attempts on both sides to mobilize people on the basis of ethnic and religious identity, the conflict is fundamentally political: a dispute over territory, who controls it and who inhabits it.
- Arab Nations frequently present the Arab-Israeli conflict as a religious conflict of the Moslems against the so called "infidel Jews". Thus, the Arab countries at war

with Israel use Islamic religion as an ideology to mobilize the Arab as well as non-Arab Moslem nations against Israel.

Here is an Islamic opinion about Israeli-Palestinian Conflict:

“When Western world discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, they always talk about two terms; Bombs and Suicides. If you are against Suicides, then we and you can make a law over the whole world to convict the suicides whenever it happens. But since that western world don't do so, that means they are not against suicides. Actually they are against bombs. It's not matter the name of the second term. The matter is the killing; whether such killing was by a normal bomb or by a human bomb.

From a neutral view, we can say that there are two conflicting parties: Israelis and Palestinians. Both have a bomb in their hands and wanted to kill each other. The first party wanted to kill the second party. So, it searched for a way to throw this bomb on the second party. The first party found an Air Fighter, Tank, or a Missile. It used these things to throw the bomb on the second party. While the second party searched for a Fighter, Tank, or a Missile to throw the bomb but it didn't find any of these things. So, the second party holds the bomb in its hand and blows it in its hand on the first party. The result is one. And, if we are going to say that one party is on the wrong side (to convict one party), we can't say but that both parties are on the wrong side (convicted). Yet, the first party has an army, has weapons, and is occupying the second party's land. While the second party has no army, has no weapons (like the first one), and its land is occupied by the first party. The first party is the one who starts... while the second party is the one who follows... The actions of the second party are a result for the actions of the first party. The actions of the first party are the reason. And, those who ask for peace should always deal with the reason not with the result. You can say: "we're looking for peace", "we don't agree with terrorism", "we don't agree with violence",...etc. But talking alone won't lead for peace. You should deal with the reason not with the result to reach the peace. A simple example, if a parent of a Palestinian kid were killed by an Israeli Missile, will this kid think of studying or think of world prosperity matters?!! No, s/he will think only of how to be a human bomb that takes revenge of Israel!”

Traditional Islamic Beliefs

- Divine authority is required for all human actions on earth.
- There is only one morality, the morality of the Qura'an
- There can be no compromise with those who do not believe (infidels).

- Governments are instruments of God.
- Religious requirements must be implemented by God's governments.
- Consent of the governed is not relevant under God's government.

Militant Islamic Beliefs

- Jihad (holy war) جهاد is the "revolutionary struggle to seize power of the good of all humanity" and in the last resort "an armed struggle".
- Universal Jihad against the modern Jahiliyyah جاهلية (ignorant barbarism) is required.
- Western governments contain the possibility of "evil, oppression, and tyranny".
- Democracy (in which the people usurp God's rule) is Jahiliyyah.
- All westernized forms of government usurp God's authority.
- Secular so-called Muslim rulers have departed from God and God's law.
- Muslims are "duty-bound to overthrow every corrupt secular dictator.
- Jihad against corrupt Muslim rulers is necessary.

Arab Nations frequently present the Arab-Israeli conflict as a religious conflict of the Moslems against the so called "infidel Jews". Thus, the Arab countries at war with Israel use Islamic religion as an ideology to mobilize the Arab as well as non-Arab Moslem nations against Israel.

To understand the role of religion in the Arab-Israeli conflict it is essential first to understand the expansion of the Muslim empire in recent history and its ideology and goals.

The Islam religion started with Mohammad in the 7th century, in Saudi Arabia of today. Mohammad included in Islam the idea of jihad to spread Islam by the use of force. Islam was spread rapidly to all the Arab nations of North Africa and the Middle East. Islam religion in the hands of the Arab nations has turned into a tool of Arab nationalism and xenophobia.

In the past five centuries, many non-Arab nations have adopted Islam as the official state religion. These countries extend from Mauritania, at the Atlantic Ocean edge of Africa, to Indonesia in the Pacific Ocean. In some respects, Islamic countries today represent an empire, extending across many nations over the vastest tract of land ever ruled by a single empire in the world.

According to Islam, the Caliph is the religious and government authority that rules the Muslim empire. After the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632, the Caliph assumed his authority which was later transferred among different Islamic dynasties. The title of the Caliph was held by the Ottoman sultans from 1517 until 1924. The Caliphate institution was abolished by Ataturk who established the modern Turkey as a secular Western looking state.

Many Islamist groups already declare that their aim is to re-establish one Muslim Nation (Islamic ummah) الأمة الإسلامية encompassing all Muslim nations, ruled by Islamic law replacing secular governments. Many Arab, as well as non-Arab countries, such as Iran and Afghanistan are examples of this trend. The mass demonstrations of support for Osama bin Laden in many Arab countries are popular expressions of support for this wish for global Islamic unity.

In historical perspective, the wish of Islamists for global rule is reminiscent of the communist ideology to establish a "world nation of proletariat" (the communist slogan was "Workers of the world unite!"). It is significant that at the peak of the power of the USSR Empire, the Arab countries were strong natural allies of the USSR against the West.

Like any ideology that wishes to establish a totalitarian global rule, Islamic Arab-fundamentalism presents a serious threat to the community of nations, including the non-Arab Muslim nations, such as Turkish republics.

While the role of Christianity as a force in shaping International affairs has decreased, the role of Islamic Empire in shaping International affairs has greatly increased as a result of several factors:

- Expansion of the Islamic Empire as noted above
- Strong Arab electorates in European capitals formed by Arabs who emigrated mostly from North Africa (over 6 million Arabs in France alone)
- The need to appease Arabs because of their financial power and control of global petrol prices
- Combination of age-old anti-Semitism (remember European collaboration with Nazi Holocaust that killed 6 million Jews!) with Arab interests in the Middle against Israel

Israel stands at the forefront of this modern clash of civilizations as the only country that represents the Western world in the Middle East. In contrast to World War II times, now the Jewish people are not just the victims but also the frontline fighters against these evil forces that threaten the human civilization. Brutal killings of civilians by Arab suicide bombers, and terrorists in Israel are nowadays almost a daily occurrence, and are executed in the name of "Allah" with the blessing "Allahu-Akbar" الله أكبر (God is great)! Many Arab parents train their youth already at an early age for suicide terrorism. In this

atmosphere, killing of non-Muslim non-believers has become a social norm that threatens to throw the humanity back to the darkest days of barbaric cultures. Yet, in the modern age the consequences will be much more severe. If weapons of mass destruction fall into the hands of evil forces of terrorism they will threaten mass decimation.

The Arab-Muslim religious philosophy of Jihad جهاد, of forceful conquest and conversion finds its violent expression also in intra-Arabic conflicts. The fact is that the number of Arabs killed in armed conflict is much greater in wars among Arab-Muslim factions, than in wars against Israel. For example, the number of dead (*mostly youth and children*) in the Iran-Iraq war is estimated at over 1,500,00. Similarly, the number of dead in Iraq's war against Kuwait is also estimated at greater than 100,000.

The word "*assassin*" originates from a "secret Islamic order originating in the 11th century who believed it was a religious duty to harass and murder their enemies." (Source: The American Heritage Dictionary)

In contrast to Islam, the Jewish beliefs and traditions are associated specifically with the Jewish People. Judaism strongly opposes forced conversions of other nations. The Old Testament Torah delineates the Land of Israel where the Jewish people lived. Israel does not seek expansion beyond the Land of Israel. Israel has withdrawn its army from territories captured after each war (*for example giving up all of Sinai Peninsula*).

The use of Islamic religion to encourage suicide bombers with the promise of heavenly life with virgins, illustrates the great gap between Islam and Jewish beliefs. The Hebrew Bible prohibits killing in the Ten Commandments and completely rejects and deplors suicide. But Judaism also states that "If one comes to slay you, slay him first" (*Brachot, 58*). This phrase is a relevant moral guide for dealing with the modern day terrorists.

There are many examples in history where Jews lived in relative harmony over hundreds of years with non-Arab Moslem nations. So, when Islam is not shaped by violent Arab nationalism, good human neighborly relations with mutual respect are possible between Jews and other non-Arab Moslem nations.

The rise of Israel is seen as a threat by many believers in Islam. Yet, Judaism should be seen for what it really is: the first monotheistic religion that led to the birth of other monotheistic religions, Christianity and Islam. It is our hope that the shared belief in one monotheistic God will provide the common ground for mutual understanding and respect, if not now then in the future.

Some see that the Israeli/Palestinian conflict in the Middle East is undergoing a new stage. It is the *Islamization* of the conflict. It is not really so much about nationalisms or territory. In this phase, it is a war between rival religions, between Islam and Judaism and it is also a war between Islam and Christianity.

Hamas was founded as the underground wing of the Muslim Brethren movement in the Gaza Strip at the beginning of the first Intifada in December 1987. Through Hamas the Muslim Brethren hoped to play a major role in Palestinian politics during that crucial period.

Thus Hamas formulated its ideology in rivalry with the secular national Palestinian forces within the PLO, and in order to refute Zionist-Israeli claims to the land. Like most other local Muslim Brethren movements in the Middle East, Hamas drew the bulk of its ideology from the teaching of Hasan al-Banna, the founder and leading ideologue of the Egyptian mother movement. However, the centrality for the Palestinians of the conflict with Israel and the unresolved question of Palestinian nation formation have placed these issues at the center of Hamas' ideology. Consequently, it has drawn practical conclusions going beyond those reached by earlier Islamist thinkers.

At the heart of Hamas' ideology is the emphasis on the 'Islamic essence' of the Palestinian cause (Islamiyat al-qadiyya al-Filastiniyya) الإسلامية الفلسطينية and Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Hamas, therefore, criticizes the PLO for portraying the conflict as one between Palestinian nationalism and Zionism. Such a characterization, Hamas argues, misconstrues the problem and the way to its solution. The Palestinian predicament, declares the Hamas Charter -- the movement's canonical text -- was caused by the absence of Islam from the realities of life. The failure to regain 'our usurped holy land' is the fault of those who kept Islam away from the battlefield with the Jews and who fought under misguided, feeble human banners. In contrast, the liberation of Palestine can only be accomplished from a religious Islamic point of departure, since Islam is the only ideology that can mobilize the full potentials of the people, and 'only Islam will break the Jews'.¹

The conflict is one of religion and it is considered by Hamas to be a clash between faith and unbelief, between Islam and the infidels (the Jews), between the true religion - that which supersedes all previous religions: Islam and Judaism which it nullifies. The struggle is between Islam and Judaism.

This is so because the Jews themselves, upon arriving in Palestine, launched their struggle in the name of religion. This belief in the Promised Land, one writer says, had preoccupied the Jews for hundreds of years before Zionism achieved what they had yearned for, and it had motivated them in their war against the Muslims.²

¹ (For general studies on Hamas, see Ziyad Abu Amr, *Islamic Fundamentalism in the West Bank and Gaza: The Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic Jihad* (Bloomington, IN, 1994); Jean francois Legrain, 'The Islamic Movement and the Intifada', in Jamal Nasser and Roger Heacock, (eds.), *Intifada at the Crossroads* (New York: 1990), pp.175-90; Hisham H. Ahmad, *From Religious Salvation to Political Transformation: The Rise of Hamas in Palestinian Society* (Jerusalem, 1994))

² . (Litvak referencing Ibrahim Quqa, to al-Anba' (Kuwait), 8 Oct. 1988; 'al-Intifada tufajjiru sira' al-khakhamat', Sawt al-Aqsa, 15 Nov. 1989)

Islamic Jihad (al-Jihad al-Islami الجهاد الإسلامي) became active in the Gaza Strip in 1979. As with other Islamic extremist groups, Jihad's goal is to completely overhaul Islamic society through political violence and differs from most other Moslem groups in that it transcends the rhetoric of Jihad and readily seeks violent confrontation with Israel, as well as nationalistic Palestinian groups which are perceived as only marginally less debased than Israel. Fundamental tenets of the organization include the notion that Arab society cannot be cured by gradual, reformist action, and rejection of the possibility of a slow evolutionist approach in allowing traditional Islamic thought and practice to permeate into all aspects of daily life. Islamic Jihad believes that immediate forceful action, imposed by a small elite of vanguard forces (طليعة) capable of imposing an Islamic regime through the impact of all-out war against Israel, is the best solution.

Others believe that the struggle against Israel is a religious war. Hamas regards the struggle against Israel and the Jews as part of a broader religious war waged between the Islamic and Western civilizations. It is the latest and most fateful phase of the relentless onslaught waged by Western imperialism and culture against Islam since the time of the Crusades. Both the capitalist West and the Communist East are regarded as one entity in this context because of their support for Zionism. Thus Hamas depicted the 1991 Gulf War as a war of the 'crusaders (Western) coalition' against Islam in order to complete what Zionism had been unable to do.³

In addition, the Jews were sometimes portrayed as instruments of the West, or alternatively as the power which controls and manipulates the West. The US, for instance, was described as a servant of Israel and as seeking to subjugate the Arabs according to the Jewish plan.

Such a view had been formulated by the Egyptian Muslim Brethren already in the 1930s, and it is shared by most modern Islamist movements. Hasan al-Banna described Zionism as a threat and a challenge to the Muslim world, but also as a beneficial experience (manha), which exposes the decadence in the Islamic world and offers it a chance of self-purification.⁴

Islamic Extremism

While the proliferation and threat of Islamic extremism is the greatest danger challenging the regional status quo, there is no evidence to support contentions that resolution of the Israeli - Palestinian conflict will ameliorate the strategic threat this phenomena poses to

³ (Meir Litvak, "The Islamization of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict: the case of Hamas" (01/01/1998) - Middle Eastern Studies referencing Hamas Charter, article 15; Handbills Nos. 10, 31, 63.)

⁴ (For the Muslim Brethren's perception, see Richard Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brotherhood* (Oxford, 1969), pp.227ff.; `Abd al-Fattah al-`Uwaysi, *Tasawwur al-Ikhwān al-Muslimīn li-qādiyāt Filastīn* (Cairo, n.d.); `Filastīn fī fikr al-imām al-shahīd Hasan al-Banna,' *Liwa al-Islam*, 7 Feb. 1989)

Israel. This is primarily due to the fact that Islamic extremism is a manifestation of deeply imbued religious, cultural, and historical norms which transcends the Israeli - Palestinian conflict.

Islamic extremist groups have proven tenacious and have scored numerous successes in many of the states in the region. Examples include:

Turkey - The 1995, election victory of the Turkish Islamic Party (RP) stunned the Western world. The RP won 158 seats in the 500-seat parliament and won the right to form a coalition government. While it is highly improbable that the Turkish military would allow any government to follow the path of Iran or Sudan, the success of Islamic parties will have a chilling effect on Turkish - Israeli relations if they continue to experience success in future elections.

Jordan - Islamic organizations won a stunning 31 out of 80 seats in the 1989 parliamentary elections thereby prompting King Hussein to support the proliferation of leftist parties to diffuse the Islamic vote. While this tactic was successful, the Islamic bloc captured only 16 seats in the elections of 1993, the popularity of Islamic organizations was exemplified by its November 1995, sweep of the elections of the Jordan Engineer's Association.

Algeria - In that country's regional elections of June 1990, the Algerian Islamic extremist group, the Islamic Salvation Front (ISF), won 55 percent of the popular vote and won control of 55 percent of the municipalities. The following year, FIS won 188 seats of the 231 seat parliament leading the military to initiate a "white coup" and suspension of elections. The net result was future movement towards democracy was held in abeyance and FIS returned to armed struggle and terrorism in an effort to overthrow the existing regime. To counter the FIS insurgency, the Algerian regime has adopted a multifaceted approach that has included military crackdowns, economic reforms, and political enfranchisement. However, these efforts have, thus far, proven futile in ending the Islamic insurgency, and over 60,000 Algerians have been killed since 1992.

Egypt - Since 1992, when Islamic extremists announced their intention to overthrow the government and establish an Islamic state, over 900 people have been killed. Indeed, Islamic violence reached such perilous levels that many western intelligence communities began to question the medium and long-term stability of the Mubarak regime. The relative success of Islamic groups in disrupting Egyptian society and in threatening to destabilize Mubarak's legitimacy has led to intensification on the part of the Mubarak government to intensify its campaign against Islamic extremists.

Israel - The Islamic movement's first political breakthrough occurred in 1989, when it won the mayoral elections in Umm Al-Fahm. The major organs of the Islamic movement in Israel are the Al-Sirat الصراط (The Path) and Sawt al-Haqq wal-Huriyya صوت الحق والحرية (The Voice of Truth and Freedom). While initially refraining from calling for the destruction of Israel, the movement had gradually inculcated Hamas ideology. Today, the movement routinely denies Israel's right to exist and is gaining support so quickly that it is considered a long-term existential threat by Israel's General Security Services.

The appeal and proliferation of Islamic extremism will increase independent of resolution of the Palestinian - Israeli conflict. The factors that breed discontent, and allow Islamic extremism to prosper, are the result of domestic and regional dynamics that have little to do with the Arab - Israeli conflict. Indeed, many of the status quo regimes have found Israel a convenient scapegoat having discovered that their vociferous opposition against the Jewish State a useful tool both in enhancing domestic legitimacy and detracting attention away from internal problems.

Conclusion

- The resolution of the Palestinian - Israeli conflict may have a negligible impact on ameliorating any of Israel's strategic security concerns emanating from the threats posed by the regional proliferation of conventional and non-conventional weapons and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. Deterrence of a future Arab - Israeli war is a function of Arab perceptions that the balance of forces greatly favors Israel. Should this perception change, then the prospect of a future Arab - Israeli war will be high regardless of continued Israeli presence on territories captured in the 1967 Arab -Israeli war.
- The influx of conventional and non-conventional weapons in the region may be motivated by regional hegemonic ambitions by the major states, and fears of those ambitions by the smaller regional powers, and is facilitated by the decisions by Western powers and Eastern European countries to accrue the economic benefits from these sales at the expense of their long-term strategic interests. Contemporaneous with the influx of these weapons into the region is the shadow of Islamic extremism which challenges the legitimacy of most of the regional states and threatens the stability of many of the existing regimes. The proliferation of Islamic extremism may also have a chilling effect on Arab - Israeli rapprochement as many existing regimes fear closer operation with Israel will exacerbate questions concerning their legitimacy.
- NGOs should put into consideration Islamic human rights declarations of all kinds that continually insist on the authority of the Islamic faith. As they believe that it will therefore guarantee civil rights which respect Islam and its principles. The goal of NGOs' role in this is to reach balance between Moslems and non-Moslems to work together in ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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