Perpetual struggle

The significance of Arab–Israeli conflict for Islamists

Beverley Milton-Edwards

Events have proven beyond doubt that the only solution to the Palestinian problem lies in Islam. [ ... ] It is important to stimulate the Islamic spirit and to drive home the importance of the Islamic solution to the Palestinian problem to the entire world.

(Abdul-Razzaq 1988: 1)

The contemporary resurgence of Islam, which in turn led to the genesis and rise of Islamism as a political expression of the Muslim faith, highlights a new era of political struggle to change the status quo in many authoritarian regimes in the Muslim world and challenge Western liberal democracy as a blueprint for governance of the modern nation-state. The priority for such Islamist ideologues and movements in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has been to bring about, through revolution if necessary, the establishment of Islamic states or Muslim-ruled states and governance founded on the principal tenets of Islam and shaped by shari’a law. Today the phenomenon of Islamism is thus widely perceived in many non-Muslim discourse and policy-shaping debates as a direct threat to the modern nation-state and political systems of the Arab world, as well as other domains such as Afghanistan and Pakistan. Hence political Islam or Islamism has become essential to current analyses of global politics, international relations, the Middle East and relations between Islam and the West.

When the focus is the Arab–Israeli conflict – its origins, enduring character and its resolution – the significance for Islamists is paramount. The Arab–Israeli conflict, for many Islamists, symbolises both the challenge they face in terms of Islam’s political function as well as a solution for Arabs who are enemies of Zionism. Indeed, Islamists contend that it is only under the banner of Islam that the conflict can result in victory over the Israeli enemy and thus ensure the restitution of Muslim rights in Palestine.

Moreover, because of the significance of the conflict for Islamists across an ideological spectrum of moderate-reformist to radical salafi jihadi their effective exclusion from conflict resolution efforts currently mediated and spearheaded by the West (specifically the Quaid powers of the US, United Nations (UN), Russia and the European Union (EU)) is problematic. The continuing failure to adequately address this factor in discourses of diplomacy and
The significance of Arab-Israeli conflict

negotiation surrounding the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict leads to a spiral of regional linkages, threats and processes of radicalization spearheaded by Salafi jihadi Islamists at the expense of regional stability and prosperity.

Palestine and faith

History is a cyclic poem written by time upon the memories of man.

(Percy Bysshe Shelley)

Sitting in the reception area of the Islamic University of Gaza, Dr. Atif Adwan, historian, administrator and supporter of the Islamist organisation Hamas, outlines to his Western visitors the importance of the Muslim past in Palestine to present-day politics and the conflict with Israel. Islam’s founder, the Prophet is recognised, and its important sites and shrines all include a locus on Palestine and the holy city of Jerusalem, the academic points out. In the popular British soap opera EastEnders, the home of its only Muslim character has a photo of Islam’s third most holy site at Jerusalem’s Dome of the Rock in its front room. On an internet forum Muslim participants discuss the importance of Palestine as related in the scriptures of Islam. Theological, visual, spiritual, and increasingly political and violent, the sense that Palestine and hence the Arab-Israeli conflict is an ‘issue’ to Muslims across the globe has become increasingly palpable.

Most contemporary accounts of Islamism relate to an historical period that addresses the phenomenon as a reaction/response to colonial control and Westernisation of Muslim societies and countries throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Varieties of Islamist discourse, however, in determining and outlining the significance of the Arab-Israeli conflict draw on a long history of Muslim religious claim, Muslim rule, conquest and even Islamic scripture when it is produced in relation to the twentieth-century origins of this state-based conflict. Such discourse places emphasis on or attaches significance to the religious nature of the Arab-Israeli conflict with its attendant signification in relation to labels such as Muslim, Christian and Jew.

The significance of Palestine in Islam is evident, many Islamists claim, by the recurrent references to it in Muslim scriptures including the Qur’an and hadith (traditions) of Prophet Muhammad. The territory of Palestine, Beit al-Maqdis (the noble sanctuary), includes the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa mosque. For Muslims, the significance of these sites in Jerusalem lies in the Imsa’ and Mi’raj of Prophet Muhammad (the Night Journey). ‘This celebrated night journey,’ notes Peters, ‘a frequent subject of Islamic art and legend was the cornerstone of the Muslim attachment to Jerusalem’ (Peters 1994: 66). The Noble Sanctuary, according to hadith, is also the site of the second mosque and the first Qibla (direction of prayer for Muslims). According to Muslim tradition prayers in the Al-Aqsa mosque in the Noble Sanctuary are the equivalent of 500 prayers in any other mosque outside those of Mecca and Medina.

Islamists also point to the material fact that successive Muslim rulers established Jerusalem as a significant holy site (after Mecca and Medina), building mosques, shrines, schools and other foundations throughout the territory and liberating it, as Salah Eddin did in 1187 from Christian Crusader rule. The land has also been successively endowed as waqf (held in perpetuity for Muslims) territory (Dumper 2002). Islamists have then generated discourses around the Arab-Israeli conflict which draw on these religious attachments and historic claims to Muslim-led victory and rule against foreign usurpers in this Holy Land. They then critique and raise the ire of their followers against those Arab states that have failed to liberate it in conflict with the present-day ‘usurpers’ of the land (Israel). Such perspectives are evident in the writings of Abdullah Kannoun:
From now on we will know of no ideology except that of Islam, nor will we address Muslims [...] except with the language of the Qur'an. We will not tell him 'fight for the sake of the right or the left, or to uphold nationalism which has separated rather than closed Muslim ranks, and helped towards atheism rather than contributed towards faith'. We will actually tell him 'fight so that God's word will be the highest'.

(Kanoun 1976: 56)

Then, in outright challenge to the Arab states, he declares, 'A government having a faith other than those of its people cannot succeed' (Kanoun 1976: 56). 'Even within the upper hierarchy of the Egyptian religious establishment,' writes Huband, 'the call for jihad to liberate Jerusalem from Israeli aggression has been publicly stated, despite being at odds with official government policy' (Huband 1999: 137).

In the twentieth century the material fact of loss associated with Palestine became a significant factor in Islamist discourses of 'recovery', 'claim' and 'rightful possession' of the territory through the principle of jihad (striving). 'All Muslims should rise in arms as one man and start a violent irresistible onward onslaught to deliver the Holy Land which has been desecrated by the sworn enemies of humanity', declared Egyptian theologian Sheikh Muhammad Abu Zahra to his fellow scholars at al-Azhar in 1968, at a conference held in the wake of the 1967 defeat (Abu Zahra 1976: 62). The territorial-religious signific ance was first attributed in 1917 when Muslim rule was ended when British forces occupied Palestine during World War I. When in 1920 the British were awarded a Mandate to rule Palestine, creating a Western foothold deemed sympathetic to the Zionist project and prejudicial to Arab-Muslim interests, the failure of Arab rulers to respond adequately to such challenges is regarded as evidence of them having abandoned Muslim principles in favour of the Western-inspired secular and nationalist ideologies. Indeed, the rise of Arab nationalism and the failure of Arab leaders in Egypt, Jordan and elsewhere in the Middle East to 'save Palestine' from the Zionist project is also debated in much Islamist discourse as the reason why a return to Islam (resurgence) will also lead to a recovery of Palestine (holy territory). For Islamists, the genesis of the Arab-Israeli conflict thus focuses on and underlines loss of power and loss of Muslim territory because of the twin forces of Western-inspired colonialism and associated Zionism and the failure of secular-national Arabs to liberate Palestine.

**Founding antipathy and anti-Semitism**

Palestine and its centrality to Islamist responses to the Arab-Israeli conflict are long-standing. It has thus come to form a 'unifying' tenet. Hence the Arab-Israeli conflict over Palestine played a major part in defining the politics of the region, and Islamist ideology. In this respect the significance of this conflict to modern Islamist discourse was established well before the so-called crisis of Arab identity, which the resurgence thesis locates in the wake of the 1967 conflict, in which the Arab armies of Egypt, Jordan and Syria were defeated by Israel. The symbolic importance of the conflict between Israel and the Arabs was identified by major Islamist figures and leaders almost at the point of its inception. In the 1920s the Syrian fundamentalist preacher Izz-a-din al-Qassam based himself in Palestine and organised a jihad against the ruling British authorities and Zionist settlers. The early salafi Islamist call authored by Islamic luminaries such as Rashid Rida also contended or sought to alert the Muslim community to the impact of Zionism.

Ponder this problem [Zionism] and make it the subject of your conversations, to discern if it is just or unjust, true or false. If it is clear that you have neglected to defend the truth.
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(‘Kamoun 1976: 56)

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of your fatherland and the interests of your nation and your religious community, ponder
and study, debate and examine the matter.

(Rida 1898)

Soage contends that Rida – whose work inspired al-Qassam, Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid
Quib – not only presented an anti-Zionist perspective to his audience, but in fact his treatment
of this ‘other’ people was fundamentally anti-Semitic:

the Shaykh did not focus his attacks on Zionism, but directed them to Jews in general [...] he
listed a series of ‘established facts’ about the Jews which, in fact, are just a collection of
anti-Semitic slurs – many of them [...] without precedent in the Islamic tradition: Jews
are selfish and chauvinist, cunning and perfidious, and deem it legitimate to oppress,
exploit, even exterminate, other peoples.

(Soage 2008: 9)

The eulogy of Zionism and anti-Semitic critique and slur has persisted in much Islamist discourse
on the significance of the conflict emphasizing the religious enmity nurtured.

Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, which today constitutes one
of the most important Islamist organisations in the Middle East, also identified the significance
of the unfolding conflict between Jews and Arabs in Palestine. Al-Banna and the Muslim
Brotherhood would become deeply involved in establishing Islamism in Palestine, campaigning
within Egypt for the government to support the Palestinians and criticizing the regime and the
British for their policies (El-Awaissi 1998). In 1947, when it became apparent that a UN
partition plan would allow for the establishment of the Jewish state of Israel in Palestine, Hassan
al-Banna called for a jihad:

In so doing he launched what has since become a key rallying call of Middle Eastern
Muslims, identifying Zionism as the enemy of the Arabs, the West as having betrayed
the Arab world by supporting Israel, and driving a wedge between Western ‘modernity’ and
Islamic reformism.

(Haband 1999: 85)

Those positions centred on a growing confrontation with Zionism and the Zionist movement.
The Islamic reaction to a looming conflict with the Zionists in 1948, however, largely consisted
of propaganda, media campaigns and solidarity drives in major Arab states such as Egypt.
Some contend that with the Islamist movement still in its political infancy in these states it
was unrealistic to assume that large numbers of Islamists could have been mobilised in terms of a
fighting force of battle-ready mujahideen. Nevertheless, by the end of the first Arab–Israeli war in
1948, with Israel enjoying control over three-quarters of Palestine, twice as much as originally
proposed by the UN, and Jewish immigrants settled in the many homes and villages abandoned
in the wake of the dispossession of hundreds and thousands of Palestinian Arab refugees, the
significance of the ‘loss’ was absorbed into Islamist discourses.

More than 60 years on, the rallying cry to jihad first issued in Palestine by the Islamists has
been raised by Muslims across the globe in the form of ongoing solidarity with what they
consider to be the plight of their brethren and the threat to their holy sites. Sheikh Yusuf
al-Qaradawi, one of the most prominent Muslim scholars in contemporary Sunni Islam, for
example, has often identified the plight of the Palestinians and the Arab–Israeli conflict as
requiring or demanding action from Muslims across the globe. His sermons and fatwas have
called on Muslims to engage in a jihad against Israel and condemned Israeli claims to the land: 'The Jews mistakenly claim that Allah has given them Palestine as their homeland, which is untrue. Allah has never ordained that people should be deported from their homes to be replaced by strangers' (Elshamy 2006: 5).

The ideological founding father of the salafi jihadi trend in Islamism is commonly identified as Sayyid Qurb. Indeed, as Musallam contends, Qurb is 'an ideologue whose writings are a manifesto [...] for revolutionary Islamists' (Musallam 2005: v). Although it would be some time in the development of Islamic radicalism before Palestine became a significant or central motif, Qurb did give significance in his writings to the issue of Israel and the conflict with neighbouring Arab states. Indeed, it has been contended that Qurb objected violently to the establishment of Israel. Nettler, for example, asserts that Qurb was responsible for developing an 'emotional hatred [...] uniquely modern as part of Muslim thinking on the Jews' (Nettler 1987: 51). Yet the Qubian perspective on Israel as a Jewish state was also created around discourse on forms of political rule defined as un-Islamic, or jahili. Here society or the state is rejected because Islam and its law (shari‘a) is absent. Qurb demanded that such societies – secular states or Western society – should be replaced with Islam and shari‘a, by revolutionary jihad if necessary. Qurb also formulated an ideological opposition to nationalism, regarding it as a 'true evil' that threatened and rivelled Islam (Lawrence 1998: 22). According to this perspective, Israel, along with secular Arab states such as Egypt, were condemned by Qurb who demanded jihad to hasten their demise. As Qurb contended:

the truth of the faith is not fully established until a struggle is undertaken on its behalf among the people. A struggle against their unwillingness and their resistance, a struggle to remove them from this state to that of Islam.

(Quoted 1988: 8–9)

Yet Nettler insists that Qurb's views were also premised on a form of anti-Semitism that would define and shape successive jihadi and radical ideologies (Nettler 1987). Abu Rabi, however, argues that this is a conflation of Qurb's position on politics and his so-called Jew hatred. Abu Rabi believes that authors such as Nettler treat 'the Qubian doctrine of hatred towards the Jews in an absolute political and historical vacuum', without reference to the historical context in which such positions were developed (Abu Rabi 1994). What is not contested, however, is the extent to which Qurb's position on Israel and Zionism did and has continued to influence the ways in which Islamists formulate their positions on the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Hence there is evidence from across the ideological spectrum of Islamism of an early engagement with the Arab-Israeli conflict and a sense that it was significant to the emerging discourse of Islamism.

Reaction

As we raise our hands in prayer to Allah, beseeching His help, we ask Him to return Palestine to us, an Islamic country.

(Statement by Ayatollah Al-Hakim in June 1967, quoted in Abdul-Razzaq 1988: 32)

Israel's victory over the Arabs in the Six-Day War in 1967 is considered a significant turning point and symbol in the debate about Islamic resurgence, Islamic politics and the struggle...
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Arab nationalism and Arab socialism [...] lost their glamour and now fell into a legitimacy crisis [...] fostering the politicisation of Islam’ (Tibi 2001: 121). Ajamia also contends that the resurgence of Islam after 1967 is ‘proof that generations of nationalists, liberal and Marxist ideologues alike, have failed to leave any real sign of their presence’ (Ajamia 1992: 171). While so much hyperbole is present in the stark and dramatic scenario after the 1967 War, it is the case that Islamist ideologues and a number of emerging Islamist movements did use the Arab defeat against Israel as a debating point as they sought not only to oppose Israel as an ‘artificial entity’ but also the Arab states of the Middle East as ideologically defective because of their continuing refusal to bring Islam to the centre of such entities and political frameworks. Even elements of institutional Islam, such as the scholarly elite at Cairo’s prestigious centre of Islamic learning, Al-Azhar University, perceived the conflict as worthy of commentary: ‘Like the Brothers [Muslim Brotherhood],’ notes Enayat, ‘some of the Azharites interpreted the Arab–Israeli war in terms of a conflict between Islam and Judaism and appealed for intensified religious education of the people as the most effective way of fighting Israel’ (Enayat 2005: 87). Arab military defeat on the battlefield against Israel became the raison d'être for an ever-increasing call to Islamize Arab societies from the bottom up, including education.

The Arab defeat of 1967 has been subsequently incorporated by Islamist ideologues, such as Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi, to emphasise the significance of Arab defeats and Israel’s continuing existence in religiously existential terms: ‘The battle between them [Zionists] and us is not a battle of borders but a battle of existence. It is a battle that will end and the Muslims will be victorious.’ In strict theological terms the intertwined theme of jahili, or a godless society, is also addressed by Qaradawi as he continues, ‘This victory will raise the sahnah [call to prayer] on the voiceless minaret and will return monotheism to the voiceless pulpit’ (Qaradawi 2007: v). For such thinkers, the Arab defeat came as a direct result of a deviation from the path of Islam. This is emphasised by Azhar:
Allah has promised His help to us […] these Jews do not have the capability to face you in the battlefield […] The Jews can degrade the Muslims […] in politics by their evil plots, but they have always been defeated in the field of Jihad […] but the Muslims left this field (war) empty. If there is fighting (against the Jews) it is not on the base of Islam but for nationalism from which the Jews are benefitting.

(Azhar n.d.: 116)

Thus the corrective was simple, potentially powerful in terms of populist appeal and a direct challenge to the hegemonic control of the nationalist Arab regimes of Egypt, Jordan and Syria. The corrective was encapsulated in the slogan: Israel was the problem and Islam was the solution. The defeat had such a significant and magnifying impact on Islamist perceptions of the Arab-Israeli conflict that not only did it serve to mobilise Muslim opinion on Palestine and Israel more generally but, as Gerges asserts, it played a fundamental part in radicalising Islamist elements that gave rise to the jihadi-salafi such as the Egyptian-based jihadi groups and al-Qaeda (Gerges 2005). Even mainstream Islamists, it has been contended, were tied to the deepening dimensions of the conflict. For Enayat the significance in the case of the Muslim Brotherhood lay in the fact that the Brotherhood could unify and appeal to a wider constituency when focusing on an external enemy such as Israel: ‘The traumatic effects of the Arab defeat in the Six-Day War of 1967’ writes Enayat, ‘was highly beneficial for the Brothens [sic] and their ideology’ (Enayat 2005: 86).

There was another post-1967 reality for Islamists to contend with in respect of the conflict. This was the fact that not only did Israel now militarily occupy former Arab territories of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Sinai and Golan Heights, but that it had captured East Jerusalem and thus its holy Muslim sites from Arab-Muslim hands. Jerusalem was subsequently annexed and declared the capital city of Israel. This loss is constantly expressed in Islamist discourse. For an array of Islamist organisations and movements the motif of Jerusalem has been symbolically threaded into their own agenda and cause.

Jerusalem the symbol

Due to the established religious significance of Jerusalem to Muslims, its importance to Islamists – particularly in recent decades – has been situated in discourses around which the theme of Israeli or Jewish control of the city is central. Two years after the Six-Day War Muslim, including Islamist, opinion was galvanised when the Al-Aqsa mosque was subject to an arson attack. Amidst feverish speculation of the role Israel may or may not have played in the attack, an ‘Islamic Conference of Kings and Heads of State’ was convened and the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) was formed. Formulating a collective Muslim response to the attack and protesting against Israel’s control of Jerusalem was a core issue for the OIC. The OIC charter, ratified in 1972, called for the ‘Liberation of Palestine’. The OIC also has a permanent committee dedicated to the Jerusalem issue, which has consistently underlined Islamic claims to Jerusalem and its Muslim shrines. Jerusalem has thus become a contemporary symbol or dimension of Muslim identity. It is an issue that animates and motivates Muslim discourse. As Iqbal Sacranie, secretary-general of the Muslim Council of Britain contends, despite their many differences and political persuasions, ‘Muslim scholars are united and resolute about one issue. They agree that the question of Palestine and the status of Jerusalem is the foremost international concern on the agenda of Muslims’ (Sacranie 2000: 22).

For radical Islamists the ‘loss of Jerusalem’ in 1967 was considered a stain on the name of Islam. For them, ‘the fall of Jerusalem’ into Israeli hands is perceived as a wound that must be healed. It is a symbol around which supporters are rallied. Reactive anti-Israeli discourse among
Islamists was also evident amid emerging claims that the Israeli state, post-1967, was seeking to Judaize the city of Jerusalem (Yiftachel 2006: 6). Israeli annexation of East Jerusalem led to the issuance of laws disbanding Palestinian civil and political groups, checkpoints and barriers in Arab East Jerusalem to prevent movement of inhabitants, re-zoning policies that adversely affected the Palestinian inhabitants, and demolition of waqf and other Palestinian properties around the Noble Sanctuary and other parts of East Jerusalem. Israeli judicial permission was granted for Jews to conduct religious ceremonies in the grounds of the Noble Sanctuary, while other security measures limited the rights of Muslim worshippers to attend Friday prayers at the Al-Aqsa mosque. Zink refers to this policy as a ‘strategic extension of Jerusalem’s municipal boundaries, bureaucratic and legal restrictions on Palestinian land use, disenfranchisement of Jerusalem residents, the expansion of settlements in “Greater Jerusalem” and the construction of a separation wall’ (Zink 2009: 122). Such claims are totally repudiated and described as a ‘canard’ and implausible when demographic figures for Jewish and Arab population growth in Jerusalem are examined post-1967 (Weiner 2003).

For many Islamist organisations across the spectrum, however, the Israeli policies are perceived as aimed and directed at the Muslim character of the city and are taken seriously. In a statement issued in February 2009 from Cairo, for example, the Muslim Brotherhood declared:

Arab rulers and Arab nations have to understand that the way to liberate Jerusalem and restore Islamic [ ... ] sanctities, in particular the Al-Aqsa mosque [ ... ] is by uniting Palestinians, uniting Arabs and allowing to free the Arab will and uniting Muslims in one project of all sorts of resistance ...

(Muslim Brotherhood 2009)

Islamists also constantly critique the failures of Arab leaders to liberate Jerusalem. The Muslim Brotherhood declared that ‘Arab regimes and governments as well as the Organization of Islamic Conference have to take responsibility for saving the sacred city from the continuous Judization going on’ (Muslim Brotherhood 2009).

Transcending Muslim sectarian difference, the symbol of Jerusalem and the call for resistance against Israel has also become a favourite rallying cry of the leadership of the Islamic regime in Tehran as well at the Lebanese Hezbollah. Jerusalem Day was instituted in 1981 when Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini declared the last Friday of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan a day to demonstrate the importance of Jerusalem to Muslims. Millions participate in pro-Jerusalem rallies in Iran and elsewhere across the world. In Iran in 2009 the Jerusalem Day rally took on an added political potency as the regime anticipated that opponents of the regime who had protested against recent presidential election results would use the occasion to raise their issue. Nevertheless, the Iranian regime strove to ensure that the focus would remain on Jerusalem: ‘Quds [Jerusalem] Day is the symbol of Iran’s national unity’, declared one headline. ‘The enemy has always sought to undermine the Quds Day ceremony,’ stated Iran’s most senior religious leader Ayatollah Khamenei, ‘but again this year, the Iranian nation will honour this day with marches [ ... ] and many of the Muslims of the world will follow this nation and revive the name of Quds once again’ (Tehran Times 2009b: 1). Behind the marches, rallies, solidarity conferences and publications and propaganda, regimes like Iran and movements such as Hezbollah have also been accused of actively supporting resistance efforts and terrorism against Israel and its forces. In 2009 Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah used the occasion of ‘Al-Quds Day’ to not only call for solidarity with the Palestinians and to threaten Israel, but to rail against Arab regimes for their failures to confront Israel (Tehran Times 2009a).
Moreover, many Islamists have contended that the future of Jerusalem should not be negotiated over by only one Arab party. This has made the fate of Jerusalem a major sticking point between nationalist and Islamist opinion in the Middle East and elsewhere.

**Hostage to Islamist discourse**

In this regard Palestinians and Israelis have been held hostage to Islamist discourse as understood in particularly religious terms. As the perspectives outlined by early Islamist luminaries such as Rida, al-Qassam and al-Banna demonstrate, there was the development of an early yet complex linkage to the issue of Palestine in terms of Islamist, pan-Arab, Muslim Arab national, salafi and jihadi discourses against the West, against colonialism, and against the programme of Zionist settlement and Western support for it in Palestine. The later ethnicization of the Israeli state as a state for the Jewish people also provided a mechanism of exclusiveness that inevitably left others out and gave greater leverage to Islamist discourse against Israel and the so-called ‘Jewish’ project.

The early roots of the conflict between Arab and Israeli were identified as having important religious dimensions and significance for Muslims in general and the Islamists in particular. This in turn was then signified in conjunction with discourse about territoriality, identity, ethnicity, economy, competing nationalisms, colonialism and imperialism. Territoriality, for example, evokes a very different analysis from Islamists than the state-centred ideologues of nationalism. The land of Palestine is considered and debated in terms of its sacredness and in particular the status of Jerusalem as a holy city for Muslims. Islamists contest and critique nationalist and pan-Arab attempts to recover the territory – in the wars of 1948, 1967 and 1973 as well as Arab nationalist strategies in terms of self-interested individual Arab leaders.

When Islamists construct the Arab–Israeli conflict from the premise of faith then it is also reduced and reshaped in new ways. If the conflict becomes explicable as a religious issue involving opposing faiths – in this particular instance Jewish and Muslim – then the nature of its resolution is also changed. Certainly there is a pattern of inconsistent labelling of who the enemy is in this respect. Some Muslim theologians have limited their discourse to Zionism and a critique of expansionism and occupation from this perspective of the Arab–Israeli conflict. Others inconsistently interchange Zionism and Jews and draw on Muslim scriptural references to the Jews to substantiate their opposition to peace deals, Jewish claims and the nature of Jewish territorial expansion in Palestine. Jihadi elements, including al-Qaeda, call directly on Muslims to launch attacks on Jews in support of a jihad to solve the Arab–Israeli conflict. Such perspectives may also explain why so many Islamist groups condemn or proclaim scepticism of traditional diplomatic initiatives to solve the Arab–Israeli conflict through international peace conferences, bilateral and multilateral forums, peace treaties and processes of normalization. The question here is the extent to which such perspectives may be read as representative of Islamist opinion and those who support them.

Thus although the roots of the Arab–Israeli conflict lie in ethno-political rather than purely religious differences, this is not how Islamists portray it. Indeed, Palestine under the rule of the Ottoman Turks was a place where the Jews, Christians and Muslims coexisted peaceably. Their inhabitants of Palestine, however, were deeply affected by the incursion of Western ideologies and cultures, which were so different in emphasis than many of their own traditions. For Islamists it was not just the economic and political experience, but the ideological and cultural shift which would have a lasting effect on the development of their own discourses including their positions on the conflict in Palestine and the role of the Arab states that engaged with Israel on the battlefield. European ideas, movements and state-building projects were manifest in an explosion across the Middle East that disrupted and created crisis in contemporary Judaism.
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both in terms of its emergence (as a reaction to colonialism and the 'decline' of Islam), as well as its resurgence in terms of the identity crisis wrought by the defeat of the Arabs in the War of 1967 and the emergence of Islamism as a countervailing ideology to collapsing Arab nationalism.

Land settlement by Jews from Europe from the late 1890s onwards, inspired by the ideology of Zionism, has become perceived by Islamists as a direct challenge to their own positions and developing political discourses on Muslim emancipation and self-rule from Western-based colonialism and later Western-inspired Arab secular national states that marginalised Islam from the political arena. Moreover, the congruent origins of the competing nationalism of Zionism and Arab nationalisms need to be underscoring here, not just in the historical context, but in terms of explaining the nature of Islamist understandings of the Arab-Israeli conflict. This became an axis around which Palestinian, Egyptian, Lebanese, Saudi and other Islamists have fixed their opposition. Islamists have traditionally been hostile to nationalism, regarding it as a threat to the unifying ethos of the Muslim faith. Zionism and its manifestation in the state of Israel is also an undeniable threat to the Islamists. Zionism as an expression of nationalism crystallized the aspiration within the Jewish diaspora for a Jewish homeland for the Jewish people. The religious appeal inherent in the nationalist aspirations that motivated the Zionists was strong, as Gresh and Vidal contend: 'the memory of the lost homeland and the desire to return there were long fostered by religion alone: “Next year in Jerusalem” believers prayed each year' (Gresh and Vidal 1990: 221). Zionism, moreover, is often represented in Islamist discourse as an ideology that is a Western invention and also part of a plot to wrest power from Muslim hands. Islamist leaders from Hamas, for example, have complained that their enemy in the conflict - Israel - has to be removed. As their late hardline leader, Dr Abdel Aziz Rantissi, maintained:

We can't change our targets [...] In the name of Allah we will fight the Jews and liberate our land in the name of Islam. We will rid this land of the Jews and with Allah's strength our land will be returned to us and the Muslim peoples of the world [...] This is our land, not the Jews' [...] You will have no security except outside the homeland Palestine [...] We have Allah on our side, and we have the sons of the Arab and Islamic nation on our side

(Rantissi 2002: 22)

Obstacle to peace?

Muslim opinion or support for Palestine has increasingly been mobilised around contemporary dimensions of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Peace settlement - such as the 1979 peace treaty between Israel and Egypt and the 1994 treaty between Jordan and Israel - also drew direct criticism from Islamists in both respective countries as well as elsewhere. If it is argued that while Arab military defeat in 1967 and 1973 created the 'crisis of Arab identity' that was a catalyst to Islamic resurgence (Dekmejian 1980), it was the Arab peace treaties with Israel in 1979 and 1994 that radicalised Islamists. Discourse with respect to jihadi-salafi positions on Israel as the 'near' enemy alongside the very regimes which in making peace with Israel were perceived as pushing the Arab nation on the path of apostasy and away from the straight path of Islam were soon apparent. Certainly there is evidence of a widespread increase in the rhetoric of jihad against Israel from the 1980s onwards. Jihadist literatures increasingly focus on Israel along with other 'enemies' such as the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in their calls for action. The differences lie in the expression of jihad, as a military or violent manifestation against Israel directly with respect to such elements.
Here the evidence is paltry. With the exception of Palestinian Islamist movements such as Islamic jihad in the 1980s and Hamas in the 1990s when it embarked on suicide bombings and rocket attacks, and Hezbollah – formed in response to the 1978 Israeli occupation of south Lebanon – the region’s major radical jihadi-salafi groups have not launched attacks (military jihad) successfully on Israel. Nor have they been able to sufficiently penetrate Palestinian Islamist groups to operate in their name or according to their goals.

In Jordan the response of Islamists to the peace treaty and normalisation of relations with Israel has brought it into moderate conflict with the Hashemite regime. The Muslim Brotherhood party in Jordan, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), responded with rhetoric to the prospect of peace settlement with Israel. This is made clear from a statement by IAF leader Zaki bin Arsheed: ‘As for normalization with Israel, our attitude is clear. We fully reject normalization with the Zionist entity as long as it occupies part of the territory of our Palestinian people’ (Arsheed 2006). Hence the significance of the Arab-Israeli conflict lay with the notion of conflict settlement with Israel and the politics of normalisation (Kombloh 2002). Normalisation with Israel has generated Arab opinion more widely across the Arab world into a debate about recognition and the efficacy of Arab measures to boycott and punish Israel politically for its position on the Palestinians and what are widely regarded within the region as Palestinian rights (Mousilli 1996). Islamist opposition was not substantive enough, however, to persuade King Hussein from making peace with Israel in 1994; nor was their parliamentary punch – as constituted in the IAF – sufficient to stop legislative changes in 1995 softening previous anti-Israeli laws (Robins 2004: 189–91).

In Egypt President Sadat’s steps to peace with Israel ultimately cost him his life at the hands of radical jihadi-salafi Muslims who assassinated him in 1981 (Calvert 2008: 152). Indeed, Sadat’s decision to sue for peace with Israel, and thus conflict settlement, resulted in a widespread radicalisation of Egypt’s Islamists who largely condemned the move as an act of apostasy. Radical elements and ideologues inspired by Sayyid Qutb now argued that Sadat and his regime should be pulled down and that a Muslim uprising was imperative if both the enemy at home (Egyptian regime) and the enemy abroad (Israel) were to be defeated. Much jihadi discourse – particularly as it relates to the evolution of debates within Islamism regarding the obligation of jihad as it pertains to the ‘near’ and ‘far’ enemy – was developed during this period in response to Egypt suing for peace with Israel (Gerges 2005). Not only did developments in this discourse have a regional impact in terms of the Arab-Israeli conflict, but it played its part in the evolution of transnational Islamism which in turn produced al-Qaeda.

Nevertheless, despite both Palestinian and Israeli fears that al-Qaeda has established an effective foothold in the Palestinian territories or that it could send mujahideen across Arab borders to Israel, it has thus far failed to transform this dimension of the Arab–Israeli conflict into a global cause célèbre of transnational salafi jihadism. As Taji-Farouki argues, ‘it is not always possible to assume militancy on the basis of Islamist threats of jihad: while Islamists share much in their hostility towards the Israeli state as occupier of Islamic land, their strategies for confronting it cannot be painted with a single brush-stroke’ (Taji-Farouki 2000: 23). Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas has more recently drawn the specific criticism of al-Qaeda, and in response it has rebutted and rebuked al-Qaeda and found itself in open and violent confrontation with jihadi-salafi elements in the Gaza Strip. Hamas leaders have consistently rejected any attempt by al-Qaeda to conflate their ideological positions and strategies on jihad against Israel, including the former tactics of suicide bombings with al-Qaeda and other jihadi-salafi violence. Hamas leaders have also directly rebuked al-Qaeda statements criticising the organisation. Such conflict demonstrates a rift that has opened up within Islamism with respect to the significance of the Arab-Israeli conflict and responses to it with jihadi-salafi elements on one side and the Muslim
Brotherhood on the other. Hence, Hamas has drawn al-Qaeda’s ire and been accused by al-Qaeda leader Ayman Zawahiri of weakening the Islamist project by engaging in elections and governance. In March 2007 Zawahiri accused Hamas of surrendering ‘Palestine to the Jews’, selling the ‘Palestinian issue’ and selling ‘shari'a in order to retain the leadership of the Palestinian government’ (Zawahiri on Al Jazeera, 11 March 2007, as quoted in Milton-Edwards and Farrell 2010: 278).

Conclusion

The Arab–Israeli conflict is an issue intrinsic to contemporary Islamism and has been central in attempts to ideologically unite Muslim opinion around the globe and across the sectarian divide of Islam itself. Islamists today lay claim to an involvement in, and support for, Muslim rights in Palestine since the 1920s. They also cite evidence of a deep religious attachment to Palestine, and Jerusalem in particular, as eternally Muslim through both its sacred status and waqf endowments. In this way they configure and explain the conflict in religious or sacred rather than secular or profane political terms. In doing so, the methods demanded for resolving this conflict are thus reshaped to include discourses on defensive jihad (jihad fard ‘ayn) and the religious rulings (fatwas) permitting violence including suicide bombings against civilian targets. Islamists cannot accept the occupation of their holy places by Israel, particularly the area of the Noble Sanctuary in Jerusalem. Additionally they and others criticise their own Muslim leaders and organisations such as the OIC for failing to unite Muslims in effective action to end such occupation. Despite the centrality of the Palestinian cause, argue Akbarzadeh and Connor, ‘the OIC has achieved little in the way of material change […] The question remains as to how an organization of 57 member states […] can continuously fail to resolve the political situation that provided the impetus for its formation’ (Akbarzadeh and Connor 2005: 80).

Furthermore, the obligation of jihad is a constant refrain of such discourses in terms of resolving the Arab–Israeli conflict, and thus negotiated solutions, peace conferences and diplomacy are dismissed as a ploy to deny Muslims their spiritual rights and their Palestinian ‘brothers’ in Islam their legitimate rights to freedom and independence. More controversial, of course, is the idea of jihad articulated by radical Islamists as a vehicle for destroying Zionism and the Jewish state of Israel. Radical ideologue Sayyid Qutb, a source of inspiration for Islamist jihadi elements, asserts that ‘The reasons for jihad […] are these: to establish God’s authority on the earth; to arrange human affairs according to the true guidance provided by God; to abolish all the Satanic forces and Satanic systems of life, to end the lordship of one man over others’ (Qutb 1988: 127). More recently, Muslim scholars such as Sheikh Faisal Mawlawi, deputy chairman of the European Council for Fatwa and Research, have contended with specific reference to the Arab–Israeli conflict that:

Yes, the Jihad in the Cause of Allah against the Zionists who usurped the Palestinian lands and forcibly expelled the Palestinians from their own homes is an individual duty of fard ‘ayn on every capable Muslim in Palestine and its neighbouring Muslim countries. The reason for that is to unify the stand in resisting the aggression launched by the Zionists who usurped the blessed land. Thus, Jihad is an individual duty on Egyptians, Syrians, Jordanians, Lebanese as well as all Muslim Arabs and non-Arabs till the Jewish occupation is brought to a halt. (Mawlawi 2004)

Here the obligation in terms of the Arab–Israeli conflict engulfing neighbouring Arabs is specifically addressed in the jihad literature. Not only is the obligation of jihad explicit for
Palestinian Muslims but those in states such as Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt. Yet in the case of Jordan and Egypt, the Muslim heads of these states reached formal peace treaties with Israel.

This is the dilemma that confronts those engaged in efforts to resolve the Arab–Israeli conflict: are they able to recognize its religious dimension? No matter how many times Israel and its supporters wish away the Islamist phenomenon on its doorstep, the reality is that it will endure in the fabric of national and regional politics of the Middle East and neighbouring Muslim world for the foreseeable future. Islamic trends across the neighbouring states will continue to present forms of strategic threat if they are not made part of the solution to this enduring conflict. Making them part of the solution, however, implies a radical change in the domestic as well as foreign policy calculations of such states towards their own domestic Islamist constituencies, as well as a wider shift within the region and the international order more generally with respect to the potentiality for conflict resolution that the OIC could make.

An end to the Arab–Israeli conflict will not deal a fatal blow to Islamism but a peace settlement between Israel, the Palestinians and the Arab states of Syria and Lebanon could create opportunities for meaningful normalization within the region, including some significant sections of Islamist opinion. In terms of Islamist opinion and Muslim attachment to Palestine more generally, a final peace agreement recognizing Jerusalem as some form of 'shared capital of faiths' will promote opportunities for further peace and reconciliation with states in the region more generally and go some way in initiating the generational transformation for peace-building that will be required for peace to be embedded.

The continuing absence of peace will certainly perpetuate Islamist hostility against Israel since Zionism emerged as a new political force in the Middle East and Israel achieved independence in 1948.

References
The significance of Arab-Israeli conflict


