

Religion and the Israel-Palestinian Conflict: Cause, Consequence, and Cure

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May 31, 2018

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Brief Analysis

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is driven by several factors: ethnic, national, historical, and religious. This brief essay focuses on the religious dimension of the conflict, which both historical and recent events suggest lies at its core. That much is almost a truism. What is less often appreciated, however, is how much religion impacts the identity of actors implicated in this conflict, the practical issues at stake, and the relevant policies and attitudes -- even of non-religious participants on both sides. It follows that religion must also be part of any real solution to this tragic and protracted conflict, in ways a concluding paragraph will very briefly outline.

Why is religion at the core of this conflict?

Several religious factors pertinent to Islam and Judaism dictate the role of religion as the main factor in the conflict, notably including the sanctity of holy sites and the apocalyptic narratives of both religions, which are detrimental to any potential for lasting peace between the two sides. Extreme religious Zionists in Israel increasingly see themselves as guardians and definers of the how the Jewish state should be, and are very stringent when it comes to any concessions to the Arabs. On the other hand, Islamist groups in Palestine and elsewhere in the Islamic world advocate the necessity of liberating the “holy” territories and sites for religious reasons, and preach violence and hatred against Israel and the Jewish people.

Religion-based rumors propagated by extremists in the media and social media about the hidden religious agendas of the other side exacerbate these tensions. Examples include rumors about a “Jewish Plan” to destroy al Aqsa mosque and build the Jewish third temple on its remnants, and, on the other side rumors that Muslims hold the annihilation of Jews at the core of their belief.

In addition, worsening socio-economic conditions in the Arab and Islamic world contribute to the growth of religious radicalism, pushing a larger percentage of youth towards fanaticism, and religion-inspired politics.

The advent of the Arab spring, ironically, also posed a threat to Arab-Israeli peace, as previously stable regimes were often challenged by extreme political views. A prominent example was the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, who after succeeding to the presidency in 2012, threatened to compromise the peace agreement with Israel based on their religious ideology – even if they did not immediately tear up the treaty.

Practical Consequences On Negotiations

If we take a closer look at the permanent status issues – borders, security, mutual recognition, refugees, the Jewish settlements in the West Bank, and the issue of authority over Jerusalem -- we find that the last two are directly linked to the faiths of Jewish people and Muslim people around the world. The original ownership and authority over Jerusalem are highly contested due to the presence of holy sites for Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the city. This conflict is also deeply rooted in history, in which Jerusalem has been attacked fifty-two times, captured and recaptured forty-four times, besieged twenty-three times, and destroyed twice. The city was ruled by the Ancient Egyptians, the Canaanites, the Israelites, the Greeks, the Romans, the Persians, Byzantines, the Islamic Caliphates, the Crusaders, the Ottomans, and finally the British, before its division into Israeli and Jordanian sectors from 1948 to 1967.

In Jewish and Biblical history, Jerusalem was the capital of the Kingdom of Israel during the reign of King David. It is also home to the Temple Mount, and the Western Wall, both highly sanctified sites in Judaism. In Islamic history, the city was the first Muslim Qiblah (the direction which Muslims face during their prayer). It is also the place where Prophet Muhammad's Isra' and Mi'raj (bringing forward and ascension to heaven, also called the night journey) ensued according to the Qur'an.

Thus the sanctity of Jerusalem resonates among many Muslims around the world, not just Palestinians. Reactions in the Arab and the Islamic world to the recent violence in Gaza and the West Bank after the U.S. decision to relocate the embassy to Jerusalem suggest that many view this issue mainly in a religious light. The narratives on social media platforms and the media in general in those countries usually included references to religion, even among seemingly secular people.

The issue of West Bank settlements, too, has a religious aspect. It concerns the physical restoration of the biblical land of Israel before the return of the Messiah, something central to the beliefs of some orthodox Jews. They continue to settle the West Bank to fulfill this prophecy, clashing with the local Palestinians.

On the other hand, according to fundamentalist schools of Islam, at the end of days, the whole land of Israel and Palestine should be under Islamic rule. Prophecies surrounding this issue are deeply rooted in some versions of the Hadith (traditional sayings of the Prophet), although only implied in the Qur'an.

Historical and Organizational Consequences

As far back as the 1948 war, some Jewish extremist groups justified their contribution to the conflict as part of a divinely promised return to the holy land of Israel. More recently, however, the most extreme such groups, like the "Gush Emunim Underground" which plotted to bomb the mosques in the Temple Mount area back in the 1980s, have been banned by the Israeli authorities.

On the other side, several religious extremist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood justified their contribution to the conflict in 1948 as an eschatological event pertinent to the approach of the Day of Judgment. Nowadays, terrorist Brotherhood offshoots like Hamas call for using violence against Israel in the name of Islam, without distinction between civilian and military targets. They continue to use religion to gain supporters in Gaza and elsewhere by propagating this apocalyptic narrative. This Muslim Brotherhood group ideology, stretching through many Arab (and several non-Arab) countries, seeks to revive Islam and re-establish the historical Islamic Caliphate by seizing power. They consider Israel to be a "foreign object" in the continuum of a potential Islamic Caliphate, and they continue to call for the use of violence against it.

In parallel to this extreme Sunni side, ever since the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, Iran has been the fiercest in opposing Israel. Its radical regime calls openly for the destruction of Israel and asserts the necessity of this quest from a theological standpoint. It finances Hezbollah and Hamas and supplies them with weapons and training, as

well as supporting Assad's forces in Syria, thereby posing a direct security threat to Israel – all allegedly in the name of Islam.

Social Consequences

For two Arab countries, Egypt and Jordan, direct peacemaking was achieved with Israel. Nevertheless, that did not entail the people-to-people or cultural normalization that is assumed to accompany peace, due to many reasons -- including religious ones. Accepting peace with Israel may be viewed as religious treachery, which goes against the beliefs not only of extremists but also of many relative moderates in Arab states. The key point is that these various forms of religion-based conflict drivers are not limited to religious groups, but are linked to much wider bases in society. This results from two major factors, as follows:

Interest and Identity Overlap: Interests of religious extremists who are directly linked to the religious drivers at many instances overlap with other segments in the Arab and Islamic societies. They share some elements of their identities, if not the whole. For example, a secular nationalist Palestinian and an extremely religious, Salafi Palestinian in the Qassam Brigades of Hamas may share very similar views of Israel. Much the same is true of some secularists, traditionalists, and fundamentalists in other Arab or Islamic societies.

Systematic Abuse of Linkages to Wider Bases in Societies: Religious extremists in the Arab and Islamic world and in Israel, whether violent or not, have used deliberately the ideological and functional linkages to connect to wider bases in their respective countries. Ideologically, links with the wider society are established by trying to radicalize elements that have this potential, either due to natural tendencies toward perceived communal self-defense, or to the superficial knowledge of their religions. For example, extremists would use an isolated incident of violence against the Jewish community to justify retaliation by their wider society. A non-religious traditional Arab might well share the fear of secularization, and of “Jewish influence,” with the Islamist. Functionally, extreme Imams have very strong tools at their disposals across the Arab and Islamic world to promote violence through their mosques and privately funded media, subjecting people repeatedly to the narrative and rhetoric of violence against Israel in particular and Jewish people in general.

Possible Interventions

To contribute to curbing the religious violence in this conflict, several interventions can be considered: interfaith dialogue; the remembrance of past fruitful cooperation between Jews and Muslims, ever since the seventh century; and focusing on religious texts asserting positive and tolerant religious values, and reinforcing these values in educational systems on both sides. These are perhaps not new ideas. What should be new, however, is the urgency and centrality of this religious component as part of any current effort to achieve an Israeli-Palestinian “deal of the century” – or even just to mitigate the conflict and pave the way for peaceful coexistence in the long-term future.



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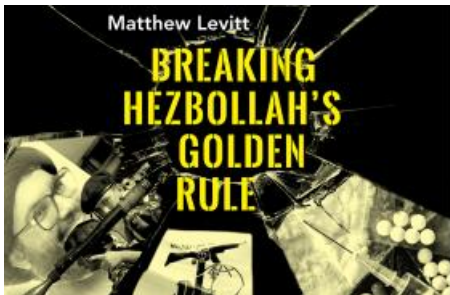
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