

*«Man is kind enough when he
is not excited by Religion»*

Mark Twain

The Arab-Israeli conflict is the one of the most complex and difficult international problems, which represents the unique example of deep interrelation of nationalism and religion. On one hand, this is a classic conflict between two national movements claiming title to and vying for possession of the same land. On the other, this conflict has deep religious roots.

The Jewish people's national revival in their historic home land in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War and the Holocaust, and after millennia of exile and persecution, unfolded during a head-on collision with an Arab national movement seeking revival, renewal, and power after a century of soul-searching at the hands of Western powers. The sharply conflicting aims of Zionism and Arab nationalism dictated their clash. The former sought to make Palestine into a Jewish state; the latter wanted Palestine as an Arab state. Dozen of attempts to bridge that gap foundered on mistrust and over specific issues.

For the Israelis, their national movement, Zionism, is a natural response to the tragedies of Jewish history. Ever since the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 A. D., Jews had been dispersed and without a homeland. Zionism meant a cultural, psychological, and political renaissance. The modern Zionist movement was inspired by secular nationalism and anti-Jewish

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prejudice in Western and especially Eastern Europe. Underlying modern Zionism was the wish to establish an independent Jewish existence in Palestine, the ancient land of Israel. Modern Zionism differed from the traditional Jewish yearning to return to Zion, Eretz Israel (the land of Israel), in that religious Jews view the matter as one to be decided by God. It was a movement of Jews who were disenchanted with their religious culture but who reject the idea of assimilation into European society.

Zionism, with its goal of establishing a dominant Jewish presence in Palestine, revised significantly the Arab conception of the Jews and their place in a Muslim society. Zionism, as a European movement, came to be seen initially as another attempt of Western imperialism to subordinate Muslims to Europeans, and became even more threatening once it was realized that the Zionist wished to take part of what had been Arab lands for centuries and remake it into a Jewish home land.

Arabs inside and outside Palestine opposed Zionism both on nationalist and religious basis. Palestine and its population had been Arab for centuries in language and culture. By geography and history, Palestine had been an integral part of the Arab world. Alongside this, pan-Arab and Arab nationalist ideology won the allegiance of the political elite, gradually displacing the traditional concepts. Indeed, Islamic and nationalist sentiments often became impossible to separate. Many things made it imperative for good Muslims to fight to keep Palestine: the Islamic identity as a community of believers (the «umma») obligated to mutual assistance, the importance of solidarity against infidels, the belief that land once controlled by Islam could never be ceded and the importance accorded Islamic holy places in Palestine. This view was held by Islamic modernizers as well as by traditionalists and never ceased to have deep roots and broad support among the Arab people. The result of these influences was to make Palestine such an emotional and symbolic question as to prompt extraordinary risk and self-sacrifice. The battle against Zionism became a life-and-death struggle in Arab minds, a fight for self-preservation against an enemy which must be opposed on every level.

During long and complicated history of the Arab-Israeli conflict Arab Nations frequently present it as a religious conflict of the Moslems against the so called «infidel Jews». For many Muslims the situation of Palestine has become symbolic of everything that has gone wrong for Muslims in the modern world. 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.

The victory of Hamas in Palestinian parliamentary election in 2006 along with the current rise of Jewish fundamentalism in Israel indicated **the fundamental shift toward more essential role of religious factor in the current Israeli-Palestinian confrontation.** It rises two major questions:

1. what are the roots of the current rise/re-emergence of religious factor in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?
2. how it will influence the prospects of the peace resolution between Israelis and Palestinians?

Rise of Islamic extremism first and foremost, is the most essential evidence of the strengthening of the religious basis of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Radical Islamic groups such as Hamas, Hizballah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and others deny the fact of Israel's existence and believe that the struggle against Israel is a religious war. For instance, Hamas regards the struggle against Israel and the Jews as part of a broader religious war waged between the Islamic and Western civilizations.

At the heart of Hamas' ideology is the emphasis on the «Islamic essence» of the Palestinian cause and Palestinian-Israeli conflict. According to Hamas the liberation of Palestine can only be accomplished from a religious Islamic point of view, since Islam is the only ideology that can mobilize the full potentials of the people, and only «Islam will break the Jews». 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, 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».

Some radical Jewish groups are as opposed to the Arab-Israeli peace process as are radical Islamic groups. These Jewish groups, which derive their support primarily from Jewish settlers in the occupied territories, are claiming their right to all of biblical Eretz Yisrael as well as right to maintain Jewish settlements on, or to continue the military occupation of, disputed areas that would be allocated to the future Palestinian state.

The main roots of the rise of religious factor in the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict are the following:

1. the collapse of the Middle East peace process (1991-2000), followed by the disappointment of the both Israeli and Palestinian sides to find the rational solution for the conflict;

2. the decline of the ideology of Pan-Arabism and the rise of the Pan-Islamism as an alternative ideology for the Arab unity;

3. the rise of anti-American or anti-Western sentiments in the Muslim world, according to which Islamic radicals regard the struggle against Israel and the Jews as part of a broader religious war waged between the Islamic and Western civilizations; etc

For the final resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to be achieved, fundamentalists on both sides must give up their so called God-given rights. Israeli radicals must give up their claimed right to all of biblical Eretz Yisrael. Palestinian extremists in their turn must acknowledge along with all the Arab and Muslim states Israel's right to exist as an independent Jewish state with secure and defensible boundaries and free of terrorism. Unless these claimed rights are mutually surrendered in the interest of achieving a pragmatic, compromise resolution to the conflict, prospects for the peace in the region will remain very deem.