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The Role of Radical Islamic Groups in Israel: Implications for Israeli-Arab Coexistence

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- Many in the Arab world felt deep humiliation due to George W. Bush. The Islamic view is that Islam came to the world to replace Judaism and Christianity, and all of the sudden comes a religious Christian president and occupies Iraq, the capital of the Islamic Abbasid Caliphate and the beating heart of Arab history. So when Bush left office, this was viewed as a victory for Allah over the modern Crusaders.
- The core question is to whom does this country belong? According to the Arab narrative, this has been an Arab Islamic state since the days of Omar, the caliph who conquered the country in the seventh century. According to Islamic tradition, he declared that the country between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River is *waqf* land, meaning it belongs forever to Muslims all over the world, and no one else could ever have it.
- According to Islam, land can only go one way, to become Islamic, and it can never go the other way, just like Spain, Sicily, and parts of the Balkans, which at different stages of history were lands of Islam. This is why Hamas and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood cannot even begin to consider recognizing the right of Israel to exist as a Jewish state on the land of Palestine.
- At the same time, Jews feel that this country belongs to them. From the Jewish perspective, this country was populated by Jews and two Jewish kingdoms were here until 1900 years ago. We Jews were expelled with no justification and we came back to our country. This is what gives justification to the Jews having our state here and not in Uganda, Argentina or Birobijan. It even appears in the Koran that this country had been given to the Jews.
- In 2006 a document approved by the Committee of Arab Local Authorities in Israel – entitled: “The Future Vision of the Palestinian Arabs in Israel and their Relations with the State” – opened with the statement: “Israel is the outcome of a colonialist action which was initiated by the Jewish-Zionist elites in Europe and in the West.”
- To call Israel a colonialist state means a total denial of Jewish history, and echoes the Islamic approach to Jewish history. According to this approach, since Islam came to the world in the year 622 CE with the *hijra* of Mohammed from Mecca to Medina, all of history before that time lost any meaning or significance.

The End of the Bush Administration – A Victory for Allah

Some in the Arab world were very satisfied with the American election because to them it meant the end of the Bush administration. Many in the Arab world felt deep humiliation due to George W. Bush, above all else. The Islamic view of the world is that Islam came to the world to replace Judaism and Christianity, not to live side-by-side with them. Then, all of a sudden, comes a religious Christian president and occupies Iraq, the beating heart of Arab history, the capital of the Abbasid dynasty, which for 500 years ruled the Islamic empire. After a few days of fighting in Baghdad, this city came under American infidel rule.

Bush said right after September 11, 2001, that the Americans were on a “crusade.” Immediately, his advisors told him not to use that word because it reminds Muslims of the Crusader Kingdom of 800 years ago, which the hero Saladin wiped out. But his statement was recorded and *Al-Jazeera* kept showing it. Muslims look at this from a religious point of view and many see what is going on in the region as some kind of test of whose god is more powerful: Allah or the Christian God. This is how too many people in the Middle East are viewing this now. So when Bush left office, this was viewed as some kind of victory for Allah.

One of the major differences between the Middle East and Western societies is the role of religion. We were brought up on the notion of a division between church and state, that the state is for everybody and religion is within your heart. This may be correct in the West, but it is not correct in the Arab world. In the Middle East, almost everything is connected to religion.

The Arab Minorities in Israel

Inside Israel, there are a number of different Arab minorities. There are Muslims, Druze, and Christians, from the religious point of view. There are Bedouins who live in the desert, which is one culture; rural peasants, which is another culture; and those who dwell in cities, either in Arab cities or in mixed cities, which is yet another kind of culture. So you cannot look at the Arab minorities in Israel as one package. You have to relate to them in different ways because they are different and they don't consider themselves as one group of people.

You can see this in the percentage of those who vote. The percentage of Arabs who vote for Arab parties in the Knesset is only 50 percent. The Arab sector in Israel altogether is about 20 percent of the population, which means in theory that Arab parties could have 24 members, or a fifth of the 120 Knesset members. However, the actual number of Arab Knesset members is around 10, and has been like this for years. Many Arabs do not even vote; they do not see the Knesset as a body that can represent them. In addition, the radical part of the Islamic movement is constantly calling on their people not to vote for the Knesset because that gives some kind of seal of approval to the Israeli state, which has no legitimacy to exist in their eyes.

The Acre Riots of October 2008: Why Didn't They Spread?

In the mixed city of Acre in October 2008, a car driven by an Arab went into a Jewish neighborhood on the night of Yom Kippur. This triggered five days of violence, demonstrations, breaking into shops, and burning apartments and houses.

At the time of the riots, Islamic Jihad and Hamas called on the Arabs in Israel to do the same thing in all the other mixed cities like Jaffa, Ramla and Lod. They tried to inflame the whole situation, but it didn't work. The calls to spread the riots to other places in Israel were not answered. Why didn't the riots spread to other cities? Because at the end of the day, both Jews and Arabs realize that coexistence is better than fighting.

To Whom Does the Country Belong?

In Jaffa, right next to Tel Aviv, there are processes that the Arabs don't like. Property is being taken by the state and given to contractors who are building new luxury housing near the sea, mainly for Jews, and this creates much resentment among the Arabs living there. This illustrates the key, bottom line question: To whom does this country belong? Every other question is derived from this.

According to the Arab narrative, this has been an Arab Islamic state since the days of Omar, the caliph who conquered the country in the second quarter of the seventh century. According to Islamic oral tradition, he declared that the country between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River was *waqf* land, meaning it belonged to Muslims all over the world, and no one else could ever have it. So how could the Jews come in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries and buy land there and establish an independent Jewish state, one that has no legitimacy to exist on Islamic soil? It was just like Spain, Sicily, and parts of the Balkans, which at different stages of history were lands of Islam. According to Islam, land can only go one way, to become Islamic, and it can never go the other way.

The wings of the Muslim Brotherhood believe that the Israeli state or the Jewish state has no right to exist to begin with. This is why Hamas and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood cannot even begin to consider recognizing the right of Israel to exist. A temporary peace of ten or twenty years can be given to infidels when Muslims are not powerful enough to conquer their lands, until Allah gives the Muslims the ability to do so.

The Muslim Brotherhood looks at the Jewish state in Israel as if the Jews occupied the country and removed it from the bosom of Islam in which it existed until 1948. When you ask to whom the country belongs, this is the basis of the Islamic perspective.

At the same time, Jews feel that this country belongs to them. From the Jewish perspective, this country was populated by Jews and two Jewish kingdoms were here until 1900 years ago. We Jews were expelled with no justification and we came back to our country. This is what gives justification to the Jews having our state here and not in Uganda or Argentina or Birobijan. It even appears in the Koran that this country had been given to the Jews.

We say today that the two narratives are fighting. The Islamic narrative says that this country is Islamic, and the Jewish narrative states that this country in its entirety belongs to the Jews. However, while we want to keep the Jewish nature of our state, most of us are not willing to kick out the Arabs who live here.

The struggle of narratives is a problem that we all have to live with. There are problems in life which cannot be solved, and the contradiction between those two narratives cannot be solved.

The Future Vision of Palestinian Arabs in Israel

In 2006 a group of forty modern Arab intellectuals, politicians, and university lecturers published a very interesting document in both Hebrew and Arabic. The document, which was approved by the Committee of Arab Local Authorities in Israel – the most significant organ of Arabs in Israel – was entitled: “The Future Vision of the Palestinian Arabs in Israel and their Relations with the State.”

Its opening statement reads: “Israel is the outcome of a colonialist action which was initiated by the Jewish-Zionist elites in Europe and in the West, was established with the help of colonialist states, Britain and France, and was strengthened by the influx of Jews into Palestine, especially in the aftermath of the Second World War and the Holocaust.” At least they recognize the fact that there was a Holocaust. In many other places Arab deny even that.

In addition, Sheikh Ibrahim Sarsour, chairman of the United Arab List, the largest Arab party in the Feb. 10, 2009, elections for the Israeli Knesset, said in a speech: “Participating in the elections to the Knesset does not abolish our ideology according to which the rule on earth, or at least on Arab and Islamic land, should be Islamic and headed by the Caliph.”¹ The party won 113,954 votes and 4 seats.

In the Muslim Narrative, History Only Begins in 622 CE

To call Israel a colonialist state is to undermine Israel’s legitimacy as the state of the Jewish people who see themselves as the owners of this country. It means a total denial of Jewish history, and echoes the Islamic approach to Jewish history. According to this approach, since Islam came to the world in the year 622 CE with the *hijra* of Mohammed from Mecca to Medina, all of history before that time lost any meaning or significance. Even the prophets – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Solomon, Jesus – all became Muslims, according to the Islamic narrative. So since Islam denies what happened before Islam, they can say that Israel is an outcome of a colonialist action because the fact that Jews were here 1900 years ago, before Islam, has no meaning anymore since that was before Islam came into the world.

This leads us back to the way Islam as a religion looks at the State of Israel and its existence in this *waqf* land. The document of the Arabs in Israel, which we mentioned before, is replete with expressions of how Israel is an illegitimate entity and how the Arabs are the natives. This is the way they look at the state where they live.

What other states have to contend with the fact that a significant minority is challenging the very legitimacy of the state? Even Arabs and Muslims in Britain or France are not yet challenging the legitimacy of those states, but here, in Israel, they feel free to do it.

Are the Palestinians Really the Natives?

But are the Palestinians really the natives? Many Palestinians, even in Israel, bear names like al-Masri (referring to Egypt) or al-Iraqi or al-Tarabulsi (referring to Tripoli in northern Lebanon). The minister of refugees in the Palestinian Authority was Abdallah al-Horani, meaning that either he or his parents came from al-Horan in southern Syria. They are not originally from this place.

They immigrated here and their family names reflect the name of the place they came from. Since when are they Palestinians?

What about the Palestinians who live today in Lebanon and the West Bank and are still in refugees camps sixty years after 1948? Where else in the world do you see refugee camps for sixty years? But where do they have the right to return to, those who came from Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria? To Haifa, where they worked for a few years for the British who brought them from Syria to work in the harbor, or to Syria and the other Arab countries where they originally came from? The world has bought this slogan of Palestinian refugees without checking where they came from originally.

The Only Arabs Who Live in a Democracy Live in Israel

Most Arabs today live either in Arab dictatorships or in democracies but in exile. No Arab state is a real democracy. The only significant group of Arabs who live in a democracy are the Arabs in Israel. Yet I would say the vast majority do not want to turn this state into an Arab state. Very few of them want to live in an Arab state. Everyone in Israel is free to emigrate, but there are no Arabs lining up to emigrate to other countries. They know exactly what the situation is because they see what goes on everywhere in the Arab world on *Al-Jazeera*, day and night: In Egypt, half of the population lives in unplanned neighborhoods with no running water, electricity, sewage, infrastructure, paved roads, or health care. Hardly anyone in the Arab sector in Israel lives in such conditions, except for some of the Bedouin in the Negev who willingly choose the culture of the desert.

The Arab sector in Israel does not want to change where they live into an Arab state. Maybe some in the Islamic movement would like to have an Islamic state here just like they want to have an Islamic state everywhere, to kick out the Arab regimes and establish a caliphate instead. But the majority of Arabs in Israel still prefer the current situation since, despite whatever discrimination they may experience, living in Israel is still far better than living in any Arab country in the Middle East.

The Arabs in Israel are much more clever than their brothers in the Palestinian Authority. The Muslims in Israel look at what happens in Gaza and do not envy those who live there. They don't envy the people of Iran under the regime of the ayatollahs either, where 95 percent of the Iranians are secular. And they don't want to live like the Shi'ites in Lebanon. Arab Israeli citizens are much wiser than that. They know exactly what the alternative is.

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Note

1. See <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3216531,00.html> and <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3217055,00.html>. The issue of a caliphate is not mentioned in the party's formal platform.

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