

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Is Not About Religion

Extremists call it a 'holy war,' but this conflict has always been about the very secular issues of territory, injustice and identity.

[Khaled Diab](#)



A Palestinian slings stones at Israeli police in an Arab suburb of JerusalemReuters

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Is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a religious one? Recent terrorist attacks and the clash over the Holy Sanctuary/Temple Mount would suggest so. But this is no holy war – far from it.

The Palestine-Israel Journal, an academic publication dedicated to studying the conflict, recently organized a roundtable discussion on the very issue of whether this conflict is religious or national. The panel – which included Israeli, Palestinian and foreign participants from academia, the media, the

clergy and the activist community, including myself – was sharply divided on the question.

My own reading of the situation is that what we have in Israel-Palestine is essentially a secular-nationalist conflict over land, injustice and, to a lesser degree, identity. This is demonstrated in the [PLO charter](#). While the document repeatedly mentions the words “Arab,” “Palestinian” and “nationalism,” it does not once refer to religion. The nearest it comes is to mention a “material, spiritual and historical” connection with Palestine.

The second most important political force in the Palestinian struggle after Fatah was, for decades, the Marxist-Leninist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, founded by George Habash, who was born into a Christian family. Many of its members were atheists, the remnants of which tell their “comrades” in Hamas that “[paradise is in this life, not the next](#),” and say “[Palestine is paradise](#).”

Similarly, political Zionism’s founder, Theodor Herzl, was a secular agnostic and perhaps even an atheist. Israel’s founding generation was anti-religion and convinced that Judaism as a faith was on the verge of dying, as the veteran peace activist [Uri Avnery recalls](#).

Many Palestinians and Arabs find this notion hard to comprehend or swallow. “Judaism is a religion and Zionism sought to build a Jewish state, so to Israelis, this is a religious conflict,” Ibrahim, a friend, remarked. This position is also expressed in the PLO charter: “Judaism, being a religion, is not an independent nationality. Nor do Jews constitute a single nation with an identity of its own.”

In light of their dispossession, and the fact that Jews themselves cannot agree whether being Jewish is a question of religion or ethnicity, this confusion on the part of Palestinians is understandable.

However, unlike what many Jews and Arabs believe, this blurring of the lines between ethnicity and faith, though irrational to the rational mind, is not unique to Judaism. After all, the fact that most of the world’s religions are, to varying degrees, hereditary, underlines that belonging to them is not related just to faith but also parentage. In addition, the notion of religion as “nation” is not alien to other religions either – in Islam, it is called “umma.” In my view, the religion-ethnicity pendulum tends to swing more toward the ethnic when a given religious group is a minority or feels threatened.

This was the case in South Asia. A year before Israel was established, Pakistan was carved out of India. Its main founding father, Muhammad Ali Jinnah was a [staunch atheist](#) who saw Islam in ethno-nationalist terms.

“The Mussalmans are not a minority. The Mussalmans are a nation by any definition,” [he told](#) a rally of 100,000 followers in 1940.

However, like Jinnah, Zionism’s political leaders were not beyond using religious symbolism and religious authorities to push their secular agenda. Herzl abandoned his pragmatic willingness to establish a Jewish state anywhere, including in Uganda, in favor of Palestine because of its religious-historical importance to Jews.

In addition, Herzl forged alliances of convenience with William Hechler and other [Christian Zionists](#), which left a bad taste in his mouth. “Hechler declares my movement to be a ‘Biblical’ one, even though I proceed rationally in all points,” Herzl confided to his diary.

Similarly, Palestinian secular leaders resorted to religious imagery and discourse – Islamic and, to a lesser extent, Christian – to resist Zionist expansionism and appeal for wider support. This is visible, for instance, in the adoption of the Dome of the Rock as a poignant symbol of the cause. Other examples include using the religiously loaded term “Fedayeen,” which literally means “those who sacrifice [for God],” to describe Palestinian fighters, and Yasser Arafat’s choice to call his movement Fatah (a reverse acronym of Palestine Liberation Movement), which in Arabic also means the early Islamic conquests.

That said, this is not a unique phenomenon. Whether oppressed or oppressor, conquered or conqueror, people tend to employ at least some religious discourse to justify or resist dominance, and where they don’t, nationalism itself is raised to a pseudo-religion.

However, over the decades, a parallel process has been taking place among each of the sides. The 1967 war was a pivotal moment in this regard, the “miracle” of which brought religious Zionism out of the margins and into center stage. On the Arab side, the crushing defeat dealt a fatal blow to secular, revolutionary Arab nationalism, from which it has not recovered. Islamists have gradually been filling the void.

This reflects how the religious aspect of the conflict is a civil conflict within each society, sometimes more so than between the two sides – a battle for the soul of both nations.

Despite the growing zealotry of religious fundamentalists, the secular foundations of this conflict remain: land, resources, rights and dignity. Yet, as the situations in Syria, Iraq and Yemen show, repeating the mantra of holy war enough can make it a self-fulfilling prophecy. We must avoid this unholy outcome in the Holy Land.

Khaled Diab is an Egyptian-Belgian journalist, blogger and writer living in Jerusalem. He is the author of “Intimate Enemies: Living with Israelis and Palestinians in the Holy Land.” Follow him on Twitter: @DiabolicalIdea.