

“The Cuckoo in the Nest”— Why Islam Can Never Accept Israel

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The Madrid peace process (which seeks to reconcile Israel and its Arab/Muslim neighbours) is based on the premise that erstwhile enemies can become friends and that, with goodwill on all sides, differences between sovereign states can always be overcome. There is much historical evidence to show that such a hope is not entirely futile.

For example, America gained its independence from Britain by force of arms, and the two countries clashed again in the War of 1812. But, today, the U.S. has no firmer ally in the whole world than the UK.

A more recent example, and one more relevant to the disputes between Israel and the Muslim states that surround it, is that of Peru and Ecuador. Those two countries have fought three wars during the past one hundred years over their disputed border. But in January 1999, they finally demarcated a mutually agreed seventy-mile stretch of the border, thus bringing their disagreement over territory to an end.

If the U.S. and the UK can put old enmities behind them, and if Peru and Ecuador can settle a century-old territorial dispute, why cannot Israel and its Arab neighbours reach a similar accommodation?

Sadly, there are two major reasons why it cannot happen. Firstly, Peru and Ecuador were simply arguing over where the border between their two countries lay; neither disputed the right of the other to exist as a sovereign nation within its own borders once those borders were established. This is not the case with Israel and its Arab neighbours. Whatever some Arabs might now be saying in an attempt to wring concessions out of Israel without the need to fight for them, the Arabs do not, and never will, accept Israel's right to exist. Even if religious differences were to be put to one side, this would still be the case—as this *Backgrounder* will show.

But, in any case, religion cannot be put to one side. It overlays every aspect of the Arab-Israeli dispute. And it provides the second reason why the two sides will never be reconciled.

The Middle East is the cradle of three of the world's great religions—Judaism,

Christianity, and Islam. In theory they ought to be able to exist peacefully side-by-side, acknowledging each other's differences, because they are so intimately linked together. Christianity grew out of Judaism, its followers believing that the scriptural Messianic promise had been fulfilled in Jesus. Islam, which accepts Jesus as a prophet (but not as the Son of God) was founded in an attempt to revive the authentic "old religion" of Moses, Abraham, and their successors.

Although this *Backgrounder* is concerned only with the struggle between Islam and Judaism, Christianity cannot be left out of the equation because its relationship with Judaism and with Islam has coloured the attitudes of both and still influences what is happening in the Middle East today.

Islam, Judaism, and Christianity existed together in reasonable harmony when the Mohammedan caliphs ruled Jerusalem and the Holy Land. The later Crusades by the West changed all that. The brutality of the Crusaders (which was reciprocated by the Muslims) has left an indelible mark on Islam. It is significant that Hamas, one of the Middle East's most dangerous Islamic terror groups, refers in its charter to "the Crusader West," and the umbrella terrorist organization set up by exiled Saudi Arabian multimillionaire Osama bin Laden is called "The International Islamic Front for Holy War Against Jews and Crusaders."

Muslims regarded the Crusaders as potential annihilators of Islam. This led to a suspicion, indeed hatred, of all things Western. And in recent years that hatred has been transferred to the only Western superpower, the U.S.—even though the U.S. did not even exist at the time of the Crusades! And because the U.S. is the main supporter of Israel, Israel and the U.S. have been linked in the minds of Muslims as conspirators in a plot to destroy Islam.

But Christianity has left its mark on Judaism, too. The appalling persecution of the Jews by some Christians over the centuries, culminating in this century's holocaust, has produced an Israel that (not surprisingly) is suspicious of everyone and is not prepared to trust anyone to guarantee its own security. In short, for sound historical reasons, Fortress Israel is not easily willing to accept, at face value, assurances about its safety from leaders like Yasser Arafat.

Israel's attitude is entirely justified. For, as this *Backgrounder* seeks to demonstrate, Islam regards Israel as the cuckoo in the nest and can never accept its existence.

I . Irreconcilable Secular and Religious Differences

Religious and racial issues in the Middle-Eastern region are not simple. The fact that Iraq and Kuwait are both Arab/Muslim countries does not prevent Iraq from wanting to absorb Kuwait by force. Egypt (an Arabized/Muslim country rather than an Arab/Muslim one) is vying with Syria (an Arab country that is overwhelmingly Muslim but that is run by a left-wing military regime) for the leadership of the Arab/Muslim world. Meanwhile, Iran (a non-Arab/Muslim state) also has ambitions to become the region's Muslim leader. Turkey is a Muslim country (though the state is run on secular lines), but this has not stopped it from entering into a strategic alliance with the Jewish state of Israel—much to the irritation of its Muslim neighbours.

Against this confusing background it is possible to identify two sets of reasons why the presence of the Jewish state of Israel is utterly unacceptable to Islamists. The first set of reasons is secular and may be broadly classified as geographic and strategic. The second is religious and relates to the age-old conflict between Jew and Muslim.

In this section we examine these secular and religious reasons why the present peace process in the Middle East can never result in a permanent reconciliation of the two sides.

Secular Reasons for Arab-Israeli Conflict

Egypt, Syria, the Palestinians, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, Yemen, and Iran all have territorial ambitions that can be achieved only by force of arms.

Although the fulfillment of the aims of Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, Yemen, and Iran would not be at the expense of Israel, they would be greatly helped by the chaos that would surround a regional war against Israel. Turkey has been drawing close to Israel in recent years, but alliances in this part of the world change swiftly. And, given the right circumstances, any or all of these five states could have an interest in precipitating a war with Israel.

But the territorial ambitions of Egypt, Syria, and the Palestinians can be achieved only at Israel's expense. Each of them, therefore, has a direct interest in the destruction of Israel. For this reason their aims will now be discussed in detail.

Egypt is something of a regional anomaly. The Egyptians are not Arabs but descendants of the Coptic-speaking inhabitants of the Nile Valley. They were conquered by the Arabs in A.D. 641, and the Christianity of Roman rule gave way to Islam. But although the country is Arabized rather than Arab, Egypt is regarded as an Arab nation and, in modern times, provided the driving force behind the rise of Arab nationalism.

But it is in the grandeur of its ancient history that Egypt's sense of superiority and its desire to become the leader of the Arab world lie. Because of its geographic position, Egypt aims to forge a link between the Asian and African halves of the Arab world. This would not only suit Egypt's strategic interests, it would also help to achieve its hope of leading the Arab nations. But to fulfil this aim, Egypt must at the very least establish a significant territorial link with Jordan. This can be achieved only by extracting territorial concessions from Israel in the southern Negev. Such concessions are not likely to be forthcoming. So, Israel literally stands in the way of Egypt's strategic goal, and the elimination of Israel is the only realistic way of achieving Egypt's hope of becoming the Arab world's leader. This makes Egypt one of the major threats to Israel's existence, despite the Camp David accords.

Syria has territorial and leadership ambitions in the region that can be achieved only if Israel is obliterated from the map. And nothing that results from the Madrid peace process will alter that fact in the long term.

Syria still resents the territorial arrangements that were reached at the end of World War I. Lebanon and Syria were allocated to France, while Mesopotamia, Jordan, and Palestine went to Britain. This distribution of Ottoman territory is

regarded by Syrians as a partition of historical Syria, which comprised the present-day territories of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel.

President Assad of Syria says that Syrians, Lebanese, Jordanians, and Palestinians are in fact one people, united by language, culture, and history. And when Westerners accuse him of wanting to establish a Greater Syria his response is that there is no such thing as a greater Syria, there is just Syria and that the term Greater Syria was invented by the Western powers to hide the fact that they partitioned historical Syria.

But Syria's aim is not merely to regain the territory that Syrians regard as historically theirs. Syria wishes to recreate the Omayyad empire which existed from 661 to 750. Saber Falhout, president of the Syrian Journalist's Union and director of the Syrian Arab News Agency, says:

During the Omayyad period, the Arab nation was ruled from Damascus. It was the centre of the Arab World. We want to regain that unity and that leadership. This idea may seem romantic to you, but we believe that one day we will achieve it.

But Syria cannot achieve it without removing Israel first. It follows that Syria can never be reconciled to the continued existence of Israel and that its participation in the peace process is merely a tactical move designed to regain the Golan Heights without having to fight for them, as it conserves its military forces for the final assault on Israel.

The Palestinians are engaged in a struggle with Israel that is, at rock bottom, secular in nature. It might seem odd to suggest that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is not rooted in religious differences, given the activities of Islamic fundamentalist terror organizations like Hamas. But consider the following scenario. It will require a big leap of imagination to follow it, but the leap is worth making in order to demonstrate the point.

Suppose that Israel is not involved in the Middle East in any way whatsoever. The Israelis are located in some other part of the world and have never lost possession of their Promised Land. Then imagine that, because of some quirk of history, it is the Iranians who are in need of a homeland and that the United Nations allocates to them those lands that now comprise the state of Israel. In those circumstances, is it to be supposed that the Palestinians would say:

That's no problem. The Iranians are Muslims. We are happy to give up territory to them and to see large numbers of our fellow Palestinians dispossessed.

Such an outcome is unthinkable. The Palestinians would do exactly what they are doing now. They would seek to regain as much territory as possible and to declare their independence.

For the Palestinians, the present conflict with Israel is, fundamentally, about territory and nationhood—not about religion. What the Palestinians are trying to do is to create a state that is viable and not wholly dependent on Jordan and Israel.

In this connection, it is significant that the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) is seeking to establish a secular state, not an Islamic one. But it must not be supposed that the secular aims of the PLO, and the newly acquired semblance of moderation of its leader Yasser Arafat, mean that it is possible for the Israelis and the Palestinians to reach a permanent accommodation.

The Palestinian leaders see the present peace process not as something that will lead to a final settlement but as a stepping stone on the way to achieving their ultimate objectives.

This was made clear by Yasser Arafat during a speech he gave in a mosque in Johannesburg in May 1994. He called for a continuing holy war to liberate Jerusalem and said about the PLO-Israel Oslo accord:

This agreement, I am not considering it more than the agreement which had been signed between our Prophet Mohammed and the Quraysh.

(This was a reference to the non-belligerency agreement that Mohammed signed with the Quraysh tribe which controlled Mecca. Two years later, Mohammed violated the agreement, conquered Mecca, and killed the leaders of the tribe.)

In October 1993, a few months before Arafat made his speech, an enlightening article appeared in the Palestinian daily *al-Quds al-Arabi*. It was written by Mahgoub Omar, an Egyptian who was at one time involved in research for the PLO and in the indoctrination of Palestinian fighters. He argued in his article that the PLO High Command saw the PLO-Israel accord as part of a programme of “phased progress,” leading eventually to complete victory. This programme, Omar said, was conceived by leading PLO figures in 1973.

Omar warned that the accord should not be seen as an “historic victory” because

[T]he real victory is the recovery of all of Palestine. Anything short of that is a partial victory, to be assessed in points pending the round of the *coup de grace*. The conflict will continue even after the final settlement. The Zionist Israeli presence will remain a source of tension, friction, and conflict until the Israeli population melts into the Arab Islamic milieu.

From these remarks, and similar comments made over the years by Palestinian leaders, it is clear that even the secular PLO can never tolerate the continued existence of the Israeli state.

The Religious Struggle Between Muslim and Jew

As we have just shown, the fundamental reason for the conflict between the Palestinians and Israel is not religious; it is territorial. Put simply, the Palestinians want their land back. But whilst the PLO sees the struggle in secular terms, many Palestinians regard it as a religious battle. This attitude is exemplified by the activities of groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad. And the thinking of these groups is not coloured merely by religion; it has a racial edge to it as well.

Anti-Semitism is a strange thing to accuse Arab Islamists of, because Jews and

Arabs are both Semitic people. But “anti-Semitic” has, by common usage, come to be applied in the Jewish context and it is a convenient label to apply to so many Islamist utterances and actions.

Historically, Islam has not been particularly anti-Semitic. In fact, in many respects, Muslims have shown much greater tolerance towards the Jews than many Christians have. Islam regards Jews as “people of the Book,” true believers in God. This is not surprising, because the Prophet Mohammed was really seeking to revive “the old religion” rather than to found a new one. But because the Koran states that the Jews had corrupted the scriptures, it is inevitable that unkind, as well as kind, things are said about the Jews in the Koran.

This ambiguity over the Jews was reflected in a recent comment by Sheikh Abd al-Aziz Bin Baz, the Mufti of Saudi Arabia, when he said:

The Prophet made absolute peace with the Jews of Medina when he went there as an immigrant. That did not entail any love for them or amiability with them. But the Prophet dealt with them, talking to them, calling them to God and Islam. When he died, his shield was mortgaged to a Jew, for he had mortgaged it to buy food for his family.

Here, we have a picture of Mohammed himself living and dealing with Jews peacefully, despite an underlying suspicion of them. And, as we have already noted, under the Mohammedan caliphs (before the coming of the Turks) Jews and Muslims (as well as Christians) co-existed without too much trouble in Jerusalem and throughout the Holy Land.

But, even in those early days, there were Muslims who despised the Jews, their feelings no doubt inspired by the statements in the Koran: “You will find that the most implacable of men in their enmity to the faithful are the Jews . . .” and

Believers, take neither the Jews nor the Christians for your friends. They are friends with one another. Whoever of you seeks their friendship shall become of their number. Allah does not guide the wrongdoers.

It is this Islamic strand of misgiving about the Jews that has developed into the vehement dislike of the Jews that is now evident among Arab Islamist groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad a dislike that has become full-blown anti-Semitism.

An examination of Hamas’ charter shows the extent to which hatred of the Jews motivates present-day Islamists. Within the first few paragraphs of the charter, Hassan al-Banna, who founded the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt during the 1920s, is quoted approvingly as saying: “Israel will rise and remain erect until Islam eliminates it . . .”

Article six of the Hamas charter makes clear that there is to be little compromise with the Jews, saying:

The Islamic Resistance Movement [Hamas] is a distinct Palestinian movement which owes its loyalty to Allah, derives from Islam its way of life, and strives to raise the banner of Allah over every inch of Palestine.

In article eleven of the charter Hamas confirms that no territorial agreement with Israel is possible. It says:

The Islamic Resistance Movement believes that the land of Palestine has been on Islamic Waqf [conquered property belonging to all Muslims] throughout the generations and until the Day of Resurrection; no one can renounce it or part of it, or abandon it or part of it.

The next article states:

Hamas regards Nationalism [wataniyya] as part and parcel of the religious faith. Nothing is loftier or deeper in Nationalism than waging *Jihad* [holy war] against the enemy and confronting him when he sets foot on the land of the Muslims.

Article thirteen makes Hamas' view of the peace process clear:

[Peace] initiatives, the so-called peaceful solution, and the international conferences to resolve the Palestinian problem, are all contrary to the beliefs of the Islamic Resistance Movement. For renouncing any part of Palestine means renouncing part of the religion. . . . There is no solution to the Palestinian problem except by Jihad.

The fact that Hamas sees the presence of the Jews as being an affront to Islam is summed up in a single sentence contained within article twenty-eight of its charter:

Israel, by virtue of its being Jewish, and of having a Jewish population, defies Islam and the Muslims.

Nothing could be clearer than that. Quite simply, Hamas is unable to tolerate the existence of Israel.

A curious feature of Hamas' anti-Semitism should be noted in connection with the group's charter, and that is the extent to which the rhetoric of Hamas is influenced by Western thinking. This is ironic, because one of the aims of Middle-Eastern Islamists is to rid the region of Western influences.

The explanation almost certainly lies in the fact that many radical Islamists were educated in the West, and they seem to have picked up the anti-Semitic attitudes of extremists in the West. For example, the Islamists have taken over the whole idea of a world Jewish conspiracy supported by clandestine front organizations. And because the U.S. is Israel's principal backer, America has been dragged into this conspiratorial theory, too.

Rashid al-Ghannushi, a London-based Tunisian Islamist has referred to

. . . a Jewish-American plan encompassing the entire region, which would cleanse it of all resistance and open it to Jewish hegemony from Marrakesh to Kazakhstan.

Hamas itself, in article twenty-eight of its charter says:

The Zionist invasion is a mischievous one. It does not hesitate to take any road, or to pursue all despicable and repulsive means to fulfil its desires. It relies to a great extent, for its meddling and spying activities, on the clandestine organizations which it has established, such as the Freemasons, Rotary Clubs, Lions, and other spying organizations. All those secret organizations, some of which are overt for the interests of Zionism and under its directions, strive to demolish societies, to destroy values, to wreck answerableness [the status of Jews under the hegemony of Islam], to totter values, and to wipe out Islam. It stands behind the diffusion of drugs and topics of all kinds in order to facilitate its control and expansion.

This is the kind of bizarre rambling that is routinely to be found in the literature of Western anti-Semitic organizations, and there can be little doubt that it has been lifted wholesale from those sources. But it has also been thoroughly absorbed into the thinking of Islamist activists.

From all this it is clear that radical Islamists regard Israel as the enemy of Islam, a potential destroyer of the Muslim faith, and a usurper of Islamic lands. For all these reasons, Islamists will never be able to tolerate the existence of Israel.

II. The Broader Struggle—and Jerusalem

As part I of this *Backgrounder* showed, Egypt, Syria, and the Palestinians have territorial ambitions that, without the need for religious justification, mean that none of them can ever accept the existence of Israel. In addition, we saw that the religiously inspired anti-Semitism of terror groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad must inevitably lead to a final showdown with Israel.

But implacable hostility towards Israel extends throughout the Islamic nations of the Middle East and through all the Islamic terrorist groups of the region.

For example, Iraq has no territorial claim against Israel, and it is not a fervently religious state. Around ninety-five percent of its population is Muslim, but it is ruled by a military dictatorship that is essentially secular/nationalist in character. Yet Iraq (which still possesses chemical and biological weapons, and the missiles to deliver them, despite the efforts of UN weapons inspectors) represents a very real threat to Israel.

The reason lies in the fact that all Muslims, whether they are particularly observant in their religious duties or not, are brought up with a specific view of the world. It is fundamental to Islam that the world is divided into two parts: *Dar al-Islam* (the world of Islam) and *Dar al-Harb* (the world of heresy), and these two parts are always in conflict.

This idea of perpetual conflict was recorded in one of Mohammed's sayings. He pointed out that those of his followers who chose to live in what is now called Palestine would "be in a state of Jihad to the Day of Resurrection."

So the idea of war between Muslims and Jews is rooted in the historical

conflict between Islam and those that it perceives to be its enemy.

And this notion is not confined to the present-day terror groups seeking the establishment of a Palestinian state. In Lebanon, Hezbollah wants to eliminate Western influence from the Middle East, to set up a revolutionary Shi'ite Muslim state in Lebanon, and to drive Israel out of south Lebanon. But Ayatollah Fadlallah, who guides much of Hezbollah's thinking, also sees Islam and Judaism in perpetual conflict.

Fadlallah speaks of

. . . a world Jewish movement working to deprive Islam of its positions of actual power—spiritually, on the question of Jerusalem; geographically, on the question of Palestine; politically, by bringing pressures to block Islam's movement at more than one place; and economically, in an effort to control Islam's economic potential, and resources, in production and consumption.

The reason for this, Fadlallah says, is that the Jews "want to be a world superpower" and that Israel is "the nucleus for spreading their economic and cultural domination." He claims that this is

. . . not merely a group that established a state at the expense of a people. It is a group which wants to establish Jewish culture at the expense of Islamic culture.

In other words, Fadlallah sees Islam and Israel as being irreconcilable and in eternal conflict.

This attitude is to be found throughout the Islamic people of the region—both at a national level and among the many Islamic terror groups. And, always, the comments and views of Islamists eventually return to one geographic location: the Holy City of Jerusalem.

A City Sacred to Jew and Muslims

Jerusalem is not the cause of the enmity that exists between Muslims and Jews, but it certainly brings into focus the intractable nature of that enmity. Indeed, the city is central to the dispute between the two sides. Jerusalem is sacred to Jews and Muslims (as well as to Christians). It has been fought over for centuries, and it will be fought over again.

King David ensured the centrality of Jerusalem to Judaism when he brought the Ark of the Covenant there some 1,000 years before the birth of Christ. And the city's position was reinforced when King David's son Solomon built the First Temple on the spot where Abraham prepared to sacrifice Isaac. Through all its troubles, and despite two thousand years of Jewish exile, Jerusalem has remained at the heart of Judaism.

The attachment of Muslims to Jerusalem is based partly on a shared belief in the importance of the Old Testament but mainly on the fact that it was from Temple Mount that Mohammed is believed by Muslims to have ascended into Heaven. For

Muslims, Jerusalem is the third holy city of Islam after Mecca and Medina. The Dome of the Rock on Temple Mount covers the spot from which Mohammed is said to have made his miraculous ascent into Heaven. And the other Muslim site at Temple Mount is the *al-Aqsa* mosque which is the central place of worship for the Muslims of Jerusalem.

So, it is an unfortunate but unalterable fact that the *al-Aqsa* mosque and the Dome of the Rock, which are so precious to Muslims, sit atop the Jewish world's most holy site.

Muslims will not willingly and permanently give up control of their holy city. But the Jews regard Jerusalem as the indivisible capital of Israel. In other words, both sides see Jerusalem in symbolic terms. Radical Islamists want Jerusalem returned to full Islamic control. This is something that Israel could not contemplate.

Whatever compromise (if any) over Jerusalem comes out of the present peace process, the city will remain as a symbol of the irreconcilable differences between Muslims and Jews. And, in due course, it will spark the final military confrontation between the Muslims and an Israel whose existence they can never accept. Ω