The Islamic Dimension in Palestinian Politics

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Nationalizing a Universal Text: The Quran in Arafat’s Rhetoric

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Arab nationalism, much like its adversary, Zionism, was at least in the early stages of crystallization, infused with religious images and rhetoric, even if the relationship between fundamentalists and nationalists later became inimical. Thus, Ghada Hashem Talhami, writing on the Syrian Ba’th, purportedly one of the most secular manifestations of pan-Arabism writes:

Not unlike the Brotherhood, the Ba’th – even its prominent Christian leadership – has always emphasized that Islam was “the eternal mission” of all Arabs. In the view of Michel Aflaq, Islam was not only a divine and religious system, but also an expression of the genius of the Arab nation. Since the Arab nation is eternal, renewing itself across human history, then Arab nationalism is one of its latest manifestations in the current historical stage. Thus, nationalism reaches its zenith only when it reunites with historical Islam, since both are no more than the manifestation of the nation in two distinct times. Obviously, the Brotherhood’s adherence to traditional Islam limited its intellectual appeal, given the Ba’th’s modern elaboration on the interconnection between religion and nationalism.

It is hardly surprising then that religion and religious beliefs have played an important role in the conflicts in the Middle East that nationalism engendered. To this day, most states with a clear Muslim majority, all of which are members in the Organization of the Islamic Conference, do not have diplomatic relations with Israel. By contrast, the overwhelming majority of states that are not composed of Muslim majorities maintain such relations. Religious affiliation might be the cause of this dichotomy.

Similarly, the first mass disturbances between the Zionist movement and the indigenous Palestinian Arab population were inimitably related to religion. The April 1920 riots began during the Muslim Nabi Musa celebrations. The next round of major disturbances in 1928–9, centred over the right of Jews to place ritual objects on the Western Wall that forms one of the walls of the Haram al-Sharif/ Temple Mount, holy to both Jews and Muslims. They are widely regarded as the beginning of the conflict between the Zionist and Arab Palestinian movement. In December 1931, Hajj Amin al-Husayni convened an international Muslim summit on the Haram al-Sharif in an attempt to mobilize Muslims around the Arab Palestinian cause. Over 70 years later, the conflict between the Palestinian Authority and Israel
that broke out in September 2000, centred once again over the same Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. Two months beforehand, the Camp David summit between Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Yasir Arafat broke down presumably because of issues of sovereignty over the Temple Mount.\textsuperscript{7}

Despite the saliency of religion, the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians nevertheless remains primarily nationalist. The forces under the nationalist umbrella still represent the most powerful political force in Palestinian society. The key issues at stake – territorial division, the creation of a Palestinian state and even sovereignty of the Temple Mount – are construed in nationalist terms.\textsuperscript{8} This is indeed the only conceptual framework recognized in the international system for the resolution of political problems.\textsuperscript{9}

Mobilizing the people to nationalism using widespread religious beliefs and symbols, however, is not an easy task. The problem is this: the most evocative images and emotions are stirred by the most sacred text, in our case, the Quran. But the Quran, so unlike what Hans Kohn felt about the Bible, is a universal homiletic text. Kohn described the Bible as the first book of nationalism because it contained three basic features – a chosen people, a sacred territory and a universal mission.\textsuperscript{10} By contrast, a hundred years before him, Abraham Geiger found in the Quran the imprint of a text ‘written in the shifting sand dunes of Arabia.’ \textsuperscript{11} If the Bible is a book of a people of a covenant issuing from the seed of Abraham, a ‘chosen’ few among the idol-worshipping many, bound for the promised land to establish their Kingdom on a twice-defined territory, the Quran is more homiletic and universal than it is historical and territorially circumscribed.

This antimony begs the question? If religion is so important to mobilize the people and the struggle with Israel so tough, how does Yasser Arafat, ‘the leader [who is] the symbol’ (\textit{al-ga' id al-ramz}) of the Palestinian people, use the Quran to mobilize the Palestinians? The following article analyses Arafat’s attempts to transform the text of the Quran into a nationalist story in order to mobilize the Palestinian people. The article is divided into four parts. I begin with an amplification of the inherent universality of the Quran in opposition to the Old Testament with which western readers might be more familiar. A description of Arafat’s speeches leads to a discussion of the relationship between religion and nationalism these speeches evoked. A third section is devoted to an analysis of the verses as they appear in the Quran and the traditional commentary surrounding them. In the fourth, these verses are analysed in relation to the way they were embedded in Arafat’s speeches themselves. The article argues that Arafat focuses primarily on the story of the Children of Israel in the Quran and succeeds, through major emendations of the story as it appears in the text, to evoke a vivid nationalist epic of liberation. The story, while emotional and mobilizing, deliberately avoids any normative content that could constrain Arafat and play into the hands of his significant Islamic opposition. This is true both regarding the future character of the Palestinian State or the extent of the liberation – partial and limited to the West Bank and Gaza or the destruction of Israel altogether – that is required.

One of the most basic features of any nationalist epic or myth is a sense of temporal flow from past to present of a founder, then a people, and perhaps, a nation.
Textually, three basic elements must be in place to provide such a story — a sense of time, a genealogy even if it only by way of allusion and metaphor, and a relationship between a people and a specific piece of land. The Quran does not contain these three elements to the degree the Old Testament of roughly the same length does. This might be due to the fact that Islam, like its more immediate predecessor, Christianity at the time, was interested in creating a universal community of faith.

Perhaps, the most striking difference between these texts lies in their relationship to time. The Bible, with all its canonical and ritual-laden digressions, is a text rooted in historical time. The time line begins with the story of creation at the beginning of the Bible and proceeds with a detailed specification of the life spans of Adam and his descendants (Genesis, V, VI, v.1; XI, v.1–32). The flow of events is distinguished one from the other by specific years, and if that is lacking, by reference to generations. In the Quran one finds no specific reference to time beyond the fact that there were events in the past, that these events are lessons for those reading the holy book in the present, with implications for the future destiny of Muslims as individuals and as a collectivity.

Without a sense of time there can be no genealogy and without a genealogy, there can be no story of an evolution into a people the way the Bible tells it. For example, the story of the emergence and indeed existence of a community that follows Muhammad is scattered and fragmented. Tradition, validated by most modern scholarship (not that most Muslims need such validation), dates the story of the peregrinations from Mecca to Medina and back again from 622, the year of the Hijra, to 632, the death of Muhammad. His death is not mentioned perhaps because the Quran is not willing to compromise its focus on God with the story of a mortal, as righteous as he may have been. The Quran cites no single list of genealogy. Though many of the Biblical figures appear often in the Quran as well, Abraham, Joseph, and Moses being the more prominent examples, one can never ascertain the historical order in which they appear in history from the text itself. By contrast, in the Bible and Scriptures an understanding of who came first, for example, the ordering of the three figures cited above, is a relatively simple exercise.

Not only does the Quran lack historical flow, it is also bereft of clear geographical bearings. From a theological point of view, this fact should hardly be surprising. God’s dominion covers all men and reaches the ends of the globe. Whatever may be the reason there are precisely few examples of the names of places. Mecca, the holiest city is mentioned twice, Medina, the second holiest is mentioned once. By contrast, Canaan as a territory or designated land is mentioned 62 times in the Bible. There are at least 40 other verses in which ‘the land’ (and permutations thereof such as the ‘good land’), clearly refer to Canaan and its designated role in the formation of the people of Israel.

Ironically, given the potency of Islamic fundamentalism in the present Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there is only one recurrent story in the Quran with which one can weave a nationalist story, the story of the Children of Israel. Banu Isra’il are mentioned 40 times in the Quran, far more than any other single personality or group, and is the focus point of one of the major chapters. In most texts, the chapter in question even bears its name, ‘the Chapter of the Children of Israel’ (XVII) (Surat Banu Isra’il), though sometimes entitled the Night Journey (Surat al-Isra’il wal-Mi’raj). The Quran describes a people entering into a covenant with God that
undergoes an exodus including the parting of the waters. After triumphing over Pharaoh, the people rule over the land. Pharaoh is the epitome of haughtiness, Godlessness, despotism and moral corruption, in short, the opposite of the prophets who are Muslims, those that submit themselves to God’s will.

The vast differences between the Biblical story and their treatment must also be borne out. It begins with the very centrality of the story. In the Bible it is by far the epic story beginning with Abraham and culminating with Moses writing the Holy Book as Joshua prepares the chosen people to enter Canaan. In the Quran, it is the focus of one of 114 chapters, albeit one of the larger, as well as being a major theme in many others. Even this chapter begins with a brief description of a nocturnal journey ‘from the Holy Mosque to the Further Mosque’ (17, v.1), which according to oral tradition Muhammad ascended from Mecca to the al-Aqsa mosque located on the Temple Mount. How one chapter could have combined in running text, two events separated by thousands of years of history demonstrates the Quran’s unhistorical nature. Similarly, Banu Isra’il refers both to the ancient people of Israel as well as to the Jews of his day. The theme of the chosen people, while existing, is certainly underdeveloped in comparison to the Bible. In any event, the people, because of their corruption, no longer curry favour in the eyes of God (2, v.88 p.12). Finally, though the Quran mentions several times a land as a destination point, one is never quite clear whether the Children of Israel triumphed in a revolution over Pharaoh in the same land or whether they make the exodus and ruled in another. Although Abraham is promised the blessed land, the Quran does not specifically link that land, or his descendants with Banu Isra’il, though tradition does. Needless to say, there is no specific reference to Canaan or to any other separate territory by name to which the exodus could have been carried out.

How then does Arafat mobilize the Quran on behalf of Palestinian nationalism? Eleven speeches he delivered between 1996 and 2001 have been analysed. They were selected because they met four basic requirements which I believe render them important. One, they were delivered in Arabic to Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. Two, they appeared in the written media and therefore reached a larger audience than those present to hear the speech. Three, these speeches were published in full. Finally, they were addressed on three important occasions – the anniversary of Fath’s founding (literally its launching – intilaqat Fath), Palestinian Independence Day on 14 November, and al-Nakba, Commemoration Day, which took place for the first time on 14 May 1998 and which has been held intermittently since.

Why these days were chosen deserves amplification. These three anniversaries evoke at least two different eras in the crystallization of Palestinian national identity. The Fath anniversary commemorates the launching of Fath’s armed struggle when its military wing, Al-’Asifa, sabotaged Israel’s national water carrier on 1 January 1965 to symbolize the organization’s declared goal of destroying the Zionist entity through armed struggle. Independence Day marks the anniversary of the declaration of Palestinian independence on 14 November 1988. Since the declaration based the claim to Palestine statehood on the UN resolution, which supported the partition of mandate Palestinian into Jewish and Arab states, the PLO implicitly recognized the State of Israel as well. The contrast between the character of these two dates is
significant. Fath Day commemorates the establishment of an organization, which at its inception, had called for the destruction of the State of Israel through the use of armed struggle. The 1968 revision of the original PLO Covenant drafted by Ahmad Al-Shuqairy, best reflected this commitment. It stressed armed struggle in liberating the whole of Palestine and limited the right of Jews to remain in liberated Palestine to those (and presumably their descendants) who lived in Palestine before 1918. Fath, the largest faction in the PLO, had basically taken over the PLO in 1969 even though the organization remains formally only a part of the larger PLO whole. The extent, however, to which the two organizations are intertwined is reflected by Arafat’s position in both, as the chairman of the PLO as well as the undisputed leader of Fath.

By contrast, the independence anniversary came to life when the PLO in its Declaration of Independence based the right to Palestinian statehood on United Nations General Assembly Resolution 181. The same Resolution, passed on 29 November 1947, called for the dissolution of the Mandate and establishment of a Jewish and Arab state in the area in its stead. The document is considered an important milestone on the road to Israeli–Palestinian conciliation. The third commemorative day of al-Nakba, because it commemorates the destruction of the Arab Palestinian political community in 1948 should evoke more hostile rhetoric toward Israel than the rhetoric in Independence Day. It should then be paired with Fath rather than Independence Day. That these commemorative dates evoke different eras and reigning myths allows me to examine continuity and change in Arafat’s religious rhetoric both over time and over events of substantially different character.

Table 1 provides the dates of the speeches according to commemoration date. The three speeches surrounding Fath Day in 1996 coincided with Arafat’s first visits to the major towns of the West Bank after the agreement of 26 September 1995 had extended the Palestinian Authority’s jurisdiction to these areas. The Palestinian Authority had been established in May 1994 in the wake of the first interim agreement signed between Israel and the PLO. He addressed audiences in Ramallah, Tulkarem and Qalqilya. The latter two were especially brief amounting to approximately 500 words while the speech in Ramallah was double that and reflected more or less the length of all subsequent speeches. Even Arafat’s longer speeches are considered short for political orations on major occasions. An analysis of a similar number of Mubarak’s speeches between 1998–2001 reveals that they

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<th>Fatah Commemoration Day</th>
<th>Nakba (Disaster) Day</th>
<th>Declaration of Independence</th>
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<tr>
<td>1 January 1996 (Tulkarem)</td>
<td>16 May 2001</td>
<td>15 November 1998</td>
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<td>1 January 1996 (Qalqilya)</td>
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Source: All the speeches appeared in *al-Ayyam*, a Palestinian daily published in Ramallah near Jerusalem.
were three times longer on average. However short, Arafat’s speeches are emotional and make great use of metaphors as the following analysis reveals.

Arafat’s speeches are replete with quotes from the Quran, religious terms and symbols and occasionally oral teachings imputed to Muhammad (the hadith). In the course of these speeches, Arafat quoted 19 different verses, some completely but most only partially. Seven of the 19 verses he quoted more than once, making a total of 42 times, an average of nearly four verses over the course of one speech. In almost all the speeches he begins with at least one verse and ends with a verse. The verses are thus strategically placed to provide the overall framework for the internal contents of the speech. Since his speeches are brief, 750 to 1000 words, I assume that they were addressed in less than half an hour. These basic facts would suggest that the verses and other religious allusions play an important role in his speeches.

Equally prominent are his opening and closing salutations. In the written version of all his speeches, at least as they appear in the newspapers, the traditional salutation: ‘in the name of Allah, the Merciful and Compassionate’ (bismi allah alrahman al-rahim) precedes the opening verse from the Quran. At the end of each speech, he cites a verse, which is almost always followed by the phrase, ‘Verily the great God speaks the Truth, peace (sadaqa allah al-Adhim), followed by the closing salutation ‘May Allah’s compassion be upon you as well as his blessings’ (al-salam ‘alaikum warahmatu allah wabarakatuhu). Frequently, the phrase ‘Verily the great God speaks the Truth’ will appear in the middle of the speech after a quotation from a verse (15 May 1998; 11 November 1998). This addendum both to the salutations and in the middle of the text is obviously meant to enhance the credibility of the message and its aura as absolute truth.

A textual analysis of speeches given by other Arab leaders demonstrates to what extent religious sentiment pervades his speeches. President Mubarak cited three verses nine times in 11 public speeches he gave between 1999–2001. His speeches are also substantially longer; 3000 words on average compared with 750 to 1000 words. In none of Mubarak’s speeches, moreover, did the verses appear at the beginning and at the end or were necessarily followed by religious salutations.

Arafat’s use of religious material is different from the more secular nationalist civic religious rhetoric that characterized leaders in the past like Jamal ‘Abd al-Nasir or Syrian leaders to this day. In their rhetoric religion is typically part of national history and culture. If God appears, he does so in a universal sense rather than embedded in a specifically Islamic tradition, verse or custom. In Arafat’s rhetoric, all the salutations and all but one of the quotes are from the Quran and other Islamic sources. His almost exclusive use of Islamic texts contrasts sharply with the emphasis he places in his speeches that Christians are part of the Palestinian people on an equal basis.\(^\text{17}\) Arafat’s rhetoric also denotes a stronger relationship with God by using the first person in the middle of the speech rather than in the more formal and stylized salutations at the end that usually characterize other Arab leaders. Thus, in his speech on 31 December 1995 during his first visit to Tulkarem immediately after that West Bank town was placed under the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority, he tells his audience that he believes in victory because ‘...I rely on God and on this brave people.’ Arafat also refrains from civic nationalist discourse. He rarely uses the word citizen (muwatin), preferring the more organic ‘people’ (sha‘b), kinfolk (ahl),
'brothers (ikhwa) and sisters (akhawat)’ in addition to terms of endearment such as my beloved (ahibba’i) and/or of recognition and merit such as ‘oh heroes’ (ya abtal). These endearments are also interspersed with references to God. These terms often appear in a flow and are indicative of the emotional tone of his speeches.18

However much religion pervades Arafat’s speeches they are clearly part of a nationalist message and destiny. A powerful example of the intertwining between religious fervour and nationalist sentiment was Arafat’s closing salutation in a speech remembering the Nakba in 2001, eight months into the low intensity conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. The closing salutation begins with the bismi’llah followed by the verse he cites most often. This brings in its wake another invocation of God ‘Verily the Great God speaks the Truth’ and once more the salutation ‘peace and His blessings be upon you’. Hardly taking a breath, Arafat then continued with a flow of remonstrations and chants mixing nationalist and religious fervour:

Until we meet in Palestine, until we meet in Palestine, in Holy Jerusalem in Holy Jerusalem, at the first of the directions of prayer and the third of the holy places, at the [sight of the] nocturnal ascent of Muhammad the Prophet, May God Grant him peace, the abode of our Master the Messiah Peace be Upon Him, to the meeting place there, there there, together and in unison, until victory, until victory. (16 May 2001)

Perhaps awkward to read, the oral cadence of this uninterrupted flow is emotionally powerful. Arafat often repeats key phrases two or three times, a common oratorical device in many cultural contexts. In as much as one can separate religious from nationalist messages, in this particular example, the nationalist chants are nevertheless more marked. The repetition of ‘until victory’ that concludes the speech echoed an older PLO slogan ‘revolution until victory –’ al-thawra hata al-nasr’. Both the religiously embedded and nationalist slogans reflect massive movement forward toward Jerusalem, one can even say a religiously inspired Crusade, and a clear emphasis on victory that echoes a slogan from more militant times in the history of the PLO and Fath.

Before looking at the verses Arafat used in the context of the speeches, it would be useful to analyse the verses within the context of the Quran and well-known exegesis, if only to try to fathom the associative flow of the listener to the speech. After all, many of these verses are well known and are taught in the school system.

The verse Arafat cited first, (he quoted it on ten occasions) is also the most general:

Surely, We shall help Our Messengers and those who have believed in the present life, and upon the day when the witnesses arise.’ (The Believers, 23, v.51, p.486).

Tafsir al-Imamayn al-Jalalayn (henceforth Tafsir al-Jalalayn), a popular interpretation of the Quran, explains that the verse deals with reward and punishment and that the fate of the righteous is the Garden of Eden and the evildoers, hell.19 The witnesses to whom the verse refers are the angels. A few verses later, the children of Israel are
mentioned but there seems to be no intrinsic connection between this verse and the story relating to them.

The Story or Narrative (28) is the source for the second most recurrent verse. The fifth verse in the chapter reads:

Yet We desired to be gracious to those that were abased in the land, and to make them leaders, and make them the inheritors, and to establish them in the land... (p. 392.)

Arafat quoted the verse seven times. The chapter begins by stating its intention to tell ‘the tidings of Moses and Pharaoh’ when the latter ‘had exalted himself in the land’ (p. 392). The chapter goes on to tell the story of Moses – how he was delivered from death by the intercession of Pharaoh’s wife, returned to his Mother who brought him up to perfection and his return to the city in which he killed ‘the other that was of his enemies.’ (v.14, p.393.) That act forced him to flee to Midian. The Tafsir al-Jalalayn adds that the story relates to Pharaoh’s decision taken on the advice of the Priests to slaughter the Children of Israel after they had told him that one of their offspring would spell the end of his rule. According to the commentary, God revealed this verse to tell the Children of Israel that they would be victorious, set an example [for others], and exalt their position in Egypt and Syria. They then were punished for rebelling against God.20

Even on its own, the connection between the verse and the present political situation is quite clear. The Palestinians, the downtrodden, will become masters of the land. In an interesting twist, the Palestinians become the Children of Israel. It may be that the haughty, arrogant and oppressive Pharaoh in the Quran personifies the State of Israel. Arafat of course does not mention the subject of the verse – the Children of Israel. For Arafat, the verse promises triumph – an appropriate political nationalist message. Recall how he repeated ‘until victory’ three times in his speech to commemorate al-Nakba Day.

Both political context and the way the verse is embedded in the text of the Quran explain why part of another verse, this time from the Chapter of the Children of Israel, appears four times in Arafat’s speeches. The quote reads as follows: ‘and they may enter the Mosque as they entered it the first time...’. On none of the four occasions, however, is the verse quoted in full. In the Quran it appears:

If you do good it is your own should you do good to, and if you do evil it is to them likewise. Then when the promise of the second came to pass, We sent against you Our Servants to discomfit you, and to enter the Mosque, as they entered it the first time, and to destroy utterly that which they ascended to.

(17, v.8, p.274)

Four times Arafat quotes the passage ‘to enter the Mosque, as they entered the first time’ while omitting the continuation of the verse ‘to destroy utterly that which they ascended to’. On three occasions this part of the verse stands alone. On the fourth, he appended an ending of another verse from the Chapter of the Romans (30, v. 6) ‘God’s promise, Allah will not fail his promise’, to the part of the verse concerning the entrance into the mosque taken from the Children of Israel. The listener hears of
course only one verse even though on three occasions he hears only a fragment of one verse and a compound of two partial verses on the fourth occasion. This phenomenon is of course not unusual in religious rhetoric. I would assume, however, that only the most learned would detect the novelty of the situation. The common denominator linking all four citations is the part quoted at the opening of the paragraph concerning the entrance into the mosque.

The verse is embedded in a story. The children of Israel are the object of the story as it appears in verses two through seven of the Chapter. The verse Arafat quotes speaks of punishment visited on the Children of Israel. Verse 4 explains why:

And We decreed for the Children of Israel in the Book: 'You shall do corruption in the earth twice, and you shall ascend exceeding high.

Verse 5 details the punishment the first time round:

So when the promise of the first of these came to pass, We sent against you servants of Ours, men of great might and they went through the habitations, it was a promise performed.

God then gave the Children of Israel a second chance, providing them with 'wealth and children, and We made you a greater host' (v.4). They did not repent and therefore:

We sent against you Our servants to discountenance you, and to enter the Mosque, as they entered it the first time and to destroy utterly that which they ascended to (v.6).

The verse Arafat quoted concerning the entrance into the mosque was the punishment meted out to the Children of Israel the second time round. In the text of the Quran, the entrance into the Mosque and its destruction are clearly presented in the past tense as something that had already happened.

According to Tafsir al-Jalalayn, this verse is connected with the people of Israel. Allah after all mentions in the Bible that the children of Israel will corrupt the land and they will be punished twice.21 The first time Jalut enters the mosque for killing the prophet Zakariyah and the second time for killing the Prophet Yahya. Tafsir al-Jalalayn understood the mosque to refer to Bayt al-Maqdis or Jerusalem.

Arafat uses the partial verse to signify an entirely different historical setting pregnant with contemporary meaning. By lobbing off the latter part of the verse and by omitting any allusion to the way the verse is embedded in the Quran, the verse alludes to the Caliph Umar bin al-Khattab's triumphant entry into Jerusalem, particularly the Temple Mount and the erection of the Aqsa Mosque. Umar was the second of the four and 'righteous' Caliphs. According to Arafat, Umar's conquest of Jerusalem was 'the first time'. And 'as they entered it the first time,' so will the Palestinians '... enter the Mosque the second time.' Basically, Arafat transposes the story from one of punishment meted out in the past – the destruction of two temples (mosques in Arabic) visited on the Children of Israel – into a story of the liberation of the temple and Jerusalem by the Palestinians in the future. Obviously in a story of
liberation, it would be folly to quote the part of the verse that speaks of the temple or mosque’s destruction.

Facilitating Arafat’s new reading is the well-known verse that opens the chapter:

Glory be to him, who carried His servant by night from the Holy Mosque to the Further Mosque the precincts of which We have blessed that We might show him some of Our signs (17, v.1, p.274)

The mosque in both classical and popular exegesis is identified with the nocturnal ascent of Muhammad and his horse Buraq from the precincts of the Mecca ‘the Holy Mosque to the further mosque’ long identified with the Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount. The night of the nocturnal ascent is an official holiday in the Islamic calendar. In the 1920s and 1930s, al-Haj Amin al-Husayni, the Arab Palestine leader frequently quoted the opening of this verse and extended its meaning to include all of Palestine. He then claimed that all of Palestine was an Islamic endowment, inalienable and not subject to territorial compromise. The Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) later picked up on the theme and formalized in its Constitution that it disseminated in the West Bank and Gaza in the summer of 1988 when the first intifada was in high gear (The Covenant of the Islamic Resistance Movement 1988).

The textual proximity to a verse, which according to exegesis takes place in the time period of the birth of Islam, facilitates the transposition of the historical setting of the verse regarding the entrance into the mosque, to the Islamic period as well. Arafat quoted this verse once in the speech he made in Ramallah on 31 December 1995 to commemorate the Fath takeoff. He quoted the verse after extolling the Palestinian people, especially those in Jerusalem to participate in the coming elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council in order to defend the ‘holy land’ (al-ard al-muqaddasa).

The juxtaposition between the original meaning and the new one raises the question whether the audience indeed received a double message – the evil of the children of Israel and the triumph of the Palestinians.

Arafat transforms yet another verse from a punishment into a story of national liberation. The verse he quoted from the Chapter of the Cow (2, v. 243) is as follows:

Hast thou not regarded those who went forth from their habitations in the thousands fearful of God? God said to them, ‘Die!’ Then he gave them life. Truly God is bounteous to the people, but most of the people are not thankful.

Again, the verse is not quoted in full. The last part – ‘but most of the people are not thankful,’ is omitted. According to Tafsir al-Jalalayn the verse is talking once again about the Children of Israel, the Jews, who indeed become the subject of verses 246–253 immediately afterwards. Thanks to the Prophet Haziel’s prayers they were resurrected but most remained apostates and did not recognize God. According to Tafsir al-Jalalayn the story regarding the Jews is told to encourage the believers to war. Once again we have a verse that ends with punishment. Yet Arafat, through omission of the latter part of the verse, transforms the situation into a triumph. A fearful people did fear God and are resurrected by Divine intercession.
The fourth most frequently cited passage, "they see it far off, but We see it nigh...and assuredly we speak truly" is in fact taken from two verses. It appears four times in his speeches. The first part of the quote "...they see it far off, but we see it is nigh, appears in the Chapter of the Stairways (70, v.6 and 7, p.606). The second part appears in the Chapter of the Rock (65, v. 64). Tafsir al-Jalalayn relates the first part of the passage again to reward and punishment. The evil doers see their punishment as a distant event yet the Almighty will ensure that it will indeed come to pass much sooner. The second part is related to the story of Lot. I believe however that it is the political context that matters. The verse is almost always described in connection with Jerusalem. Presently the Palestinian, the righteous, see Jerusalem from afar due to the closure the Israelis impose on them, but soon they will surely see it nigh when Jerusalem will become the capital of the Palestinian state.

This verse obviously relates thematically to the previously analysed verse on the entrance into the mosque. Physically, according to Arafat, both verses are speaking about the same mosque and both bear the same Divine Promise, one explicitly so, the other implicitly. Tafsir al-Jalalayn however interprets the verse not physically but temporally. The evildoers see the punishment as being in the distant future while God is sure to speed up the process. The Palestinian listener in the context of what is being said most probably understands the verse in physical terms. He sees Jerusalem from afar and will see it close. The sub-text, which he might have learned in school, might echo its temporal meaning. The audience might not only be reflecting on the distance to the Mosque and Jerusalem and how they are going to bridge it, but the time frame to achieve it as well. The traditional exegesis, albeit in this transposed setting, assures them that they will enter the mosque soon. These four verses all told accounted for 25 of the 42 times Arafat cited verses in his speeches.

Arafat also cited a particularly long verse from the Chapter of the Family (3, v.26) at the beginning of his speech on 15 November 1996 and at the end of the speech on 14 November three years later. The verse is as follows:

Say: 'O God, Master of the Kingdom, Thou givest the Kingdom to whom Thou wilt, and siezest the Kindom, thou exaltest whom Thou wilt and Thou abasest whom Thou wilt; in Thy hand is the food; Thou art powerful over everything.

On both occasions the quote was followed by the traditional phrase: 'Verily the Great God Speaks the Truth.' Since the quote appears on both occasions outside the speech or text it is difficult to ascertain its significance to the listener or reader. One basic fact has to be acknowledged. Since on both occasions it was either preceded or succeeded by political discourse the quote was intended to communicate a political message. One could understand it to mean that Palestine, now divided, is God’s wish and one might do best to be resigned to the fact. It could equally be understood to mean quite the opposite, namely, that just as God gave the land to the Jews for a certain period of time the tide could change and Palestinians could be given kingdom over the land instead. I assume the latter because of the dynamic quality of the verse. God is an active actor. He has not divided anything in a compromising way but takes from those who displease him and gives to those that please him. The Children of Israel, the Jews, had displeased him. The nature of God’s transactions rests on a zero sum concept in the allocation of political goods.
Over all, one can say that the major themes of the verses measured by their frequency is that of the resurrection of people from figurative death, the transformation from a downtrodden people to heirs and masters of the Holy Land, and most specifically, the return to the Mosque/Jerusalem. In short, the verses tell a story of a people returning to their land. Ironically, it sounds very much like the story of Exodus that according to the historian Hans Kohn, made the Bible the first nationalist text. Arafat’s use and reading of the verses is certainly a nationalist reading. But talking of resurrection and focusing on return to a mosque also means the impact works both ways. Just as the Palestinians are in the process of resurrecting their identity and becoming masters of the land they are focusing on returning to a mosque. The message is also religious in the sense that the spiritual centre is intimately tied to a holy sight.

Perhaps even more important than the meaning and images these verses themselves evoke in the listener is the message they convey in the context of Arafat’s speeches and the setting in which these speeches are held. The following analysis looks at the way these verses are embedded in the speeches and the supplemental meanings they might evoke amongst his listeners.

The most frequently cited verse – ‘Surely We shall help Our Messengers and those who have believed in the present life, and upon the day when the witnesses arise’ (The Believers, 40, v. 51, p. 486) – is also one of the most obtuse politically. Can the positioning of the first verse shed light on its political meaning? In the two Fath speeches of 1996 and 1999, respectively, Arafat cited them at the end of the speech. They were not related substantively to what was said before but to confirm the intrinsic truth of the messages evoked in the speech and the certainty that these hopes will come to pass just as the day of witnessing. Finally, one can assume that the very use of the verse, particularly well known, will add to the sacredness of the speech and the speaker and perhaps most importantly, the day being remembered.

On one occasion at least, Arafat provides the exegesis to a verse himself. He cited the verse ‘hast thou not regarded those who went forth from their habitations in their thousands fearful of God? God said to them, “Die!” then he gave them life. Truly God is bounteous to the people.’ The verse appeared in the middle of his al-Nakba speech in May 1998. Just before quoting the verse he claimed that many said that the generation of the 1948 disaster would die and that the new generation would forget the Nakba. ‘But our people achieved a human miracle, they entered the shadow of death and they came out alive. Is that not what God promised in his beloved book...’

The obtuseness of the verses above contrasts sharply with the striking clarity of the second most frequently quoted verse from the chapter ‘The Story’ (28). The first part of the verse ‘And we desired to bestow a favour upon those who were deemed weak in the land’ can be readily understood as the Palestinians, the underdogs in the Israeli–Palestinian struggle. Equally translucent is the second half of the verse ‘to make them the Imams (spiritual leaders), and to make the downtrodden, the heirs, and to grant them power in the land.’ The latter part of the verse talks of a series of transformations. The transformation into Imams reflects a promise that a people downtrodden spiritually will become the spiritual leaders, those dispossessed will be
transformed into heirs and those powerless in the land will become its leaders. In the first speech we analyse commemorating Fath Day on 30 December, 1995, Arafat quotes the verse immediately after he mentions the martyrs and the prisoners whom he assures will be freed soon. Many Palestinians had hoped (in retrospect wrongly), that they would be freed as a result of the interim accords signed in 1994 and in 1995. Who could be weaker than the prisoners languishing in Israeli prisons and who deserved more after regaining their freedom to be made the imams and the spiritual leaders than those who sacrificed for the national cause?

The idea of arriving finally at a final physical yet at the same time, holy destination, the Blessed or Holy Land or Jerusalem, we found in looking at the verses themselves. They take on extra meaning in the context of the speeches themselves.

In the 1995 Ramallah speech on 30 December, commemorating the Fath takeoff, Arafat linked the verse ‘Surely We shall help Our Messengers and those who have believed in the present life, and upon the day when the witnesses arise’ to Jerusalem. The passage in its entirety was as follows:

Oh my brothers, you must vote in the most noble of elections...can I not say that I see at the end of the tunnel the walls of Jerusalem, the towers of the mosques of Jerusalem and the churches of Jerusalem. Lo and Behold, you and I see the walls of Jerusalem the towers of the mosques of Jerusalem and the churches of Jerusalem, ‘We see it from afar we see it nigh’. ‘Surely We shall help Our Messengers and those who have believed in the present life, and upon the day when the witnesses arise.’

Arafat was referring to the elections for the Legislative Council in the Palestinian Authority, which took place in March 1996. Arafat was addressing his remarks primarily to Arab residents of Jerusalem and others in the vicinity of Ramallah who bear Israeli identity cards and enjoy freedom of movement and Israeli social welfare benefits. Massive participation on their part would have strengthened Palestinian claims to sovereignty to the Arab parts of Jerusalem.

With some poetic licence one can achieve the same effect even if according to tradition, one quotes a verse about the conquest of Mecca. In his speech in Tulkarem on 31 December 1995 he quoted the verse from the Chapter of the Victory (47, vs.1-3, p.531):

Surely We have given thee a manifest victory, that God may forgive thee thy former and thy latter sins, and complete His blessing upon thee, and guide thee on a straight path and that God may help thee with mighty help.

According to *Tafsir al-Jalalayn*, the verse refers to the victory of Muhammad and his followers that enabled them to take over Mecca. Arafat transposed this anticipated victory to Jerusalem by the greetings that immediately follow the quote: ‘Oh my beloved, Oh my brothers, Oh my valiant ones, Oh heroes of the rocks [referring to the first intifada], Oh brothers of Salah al-Din [al-Ayyubi] in the liberated district of Tulkarem.’ Salah al-Din (al-Ayyubi) was the legendary military leader and ruler who conquered Jerusalem and nearly destroyed the Crusader Kingdom. So focused was
Arafat on making the connection between the verse and Jerusalem that he continued afterwards with a long additional string of salutations his first political message addresses Jerusalem when he conveys his wish and resolve to pray there together 'God Willing.'

Jerusalem and al-Aqsa are certainly the focus, but so is the land. Arafat makes frequent use of the Holy Land (al-ard al-muqaddasa), the blessed land (al-ard al-mubarak) or blessed Palestine. In his speech to commemorate the Nakba (15 May 1998) he brings the only verse in the Quran that consecrates specifically a land of major proportions (The Chapter of the Prophets, 21, v.71, p.328).

And We delivered him [Abraham] and Lot, unto the land that We had blessed for all beings.

Tafsir al-Jalalayn explains that God saved Abraham from the idol worshippers and sent him to a land filled with rivers and trees, which he identified with Syria. In short, what can be understood from the verses standing on their own, receives added confirmation within the speeches themselves. The nationalist story of the Children of Israel, which has so informed western nationalism, is transformed into a story of the Palestinian people.

Arafat's speeches belie the idea that nationalism is a surrogate religion and is therefore in apposition to transcendental belief systems. In his rhetoric he identifies with Islamic religious beliefs. At the same time, however, he never identifies these precepts or messages as being self-consciously Islamic. By refraining from speaking in the name of Islam, yet at the same time expressing religious sentiment and evoking religious images almost exclusively from the Islamic texts, his discourse remains true to the nationalist tradition of secular Arab leaders that religion should seem universal. Referring to religion universally enables him to include Christian Palestinians within the bounds of the Palestinian people. Simultaneously, his emotional identification with verses from the Quran and Islamic symbols is calculated to solidify the Islamic majority struggling against a people with a distinct religion of their own.

Supporting finding that his discourse remains essentially nationalist comes from another quarter as well. None of what he quotes or evokes has any bearing on the political character of the Palestinian State, its legal norms and the actual Palestinian political system. Ironically, the style and content of the Quran, devoid of almost any programmatic reference to how one governs the polity, facilitates Arafat's objectives. The Quran as a homiletic and evocative text is in this sense a pliable instrument in the hands of a nation-builder.

Arafat does not use religious rhetoric to shape the internal Palestinian system but to evoke and strengthen a myth of liberation against Israel. The Quran proves to be a highly useful text in this regard. Ironically, the best materials in achieving this purpose are verses that are related to the Children of Israel. The Palestinian leader changes the story and transposes it to a new more relevant political setting. While in the Quran the Children of Israel ultimately fail, the Palestinians will ultimately prevail. One could be tempted to think that Arafat is creating a theology of a new
Israel to replace the old. However, the absence of ideas of election and selection make this theological reading highly unlikely. Rather he is interested in imagery and visceral emotion to mobilize a partially dispersed people in the achievement of Palestinian statehood, arguably at the expense of the existing state of Israel. Ultimately, he is using religion on behalf of a nationalist cause just as his internal opponents, the Hamas and the Jihad al-Islami often evoke a love of country and of a people on behalf of their theocratic goals that compete with Palestinian nationalism.

Notes

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5. Ibid. p.3.


12. The chapters and verses cited in Genesis are merely the first two of several lists of genealogy that appear in the Bible.


15. Mustafa Sabri, the last Shaykh al-Islam of the Ottoman Empire commented that ‘Abraham divided the inheritance between the two sons: to Ishmael, the Arabian peninsula and within it Mecca, and Syria Al-Quds [Jerusalem] to Ishak...After Muhammad’s appearance, God gave them [the people of
Israel...the last chance to repent. They did not take the opportunity they would therefore be dislodged permanently from protecting the Jerusalem (Bayt al-Maqdis) and the inheritance of Israel will be joined to the inheritance of Ishmael. Quoted in Isaac Wine, Abu Bakr Muhammad Ahmad al-Wasiti, Fada'il Bayt al-Maqdis, (Jerusalem: Magnes 1979), fn. 29. The well-known fundamentalist Sayyid Qutb claimed that the night journey from Mecca to al-Aqsa Mosque was a clear indication that all the holy sites which preceded him fell to his inheritance. See ibid.


17. That Christians are part of the Palestinian people is a recurrent theme in Arafat’s speeches. His remarks in his speech in Ramallah a town with a large Christian population is a typical example:

    I salute and welcome my brothers, my kin and the dignitaries of the Christian and Islamic faiths and I tell the Christian sons of my people may you have a good year and may the homeland prosper. Yes to Islamic and Christian national unity.' (In Arabic it rhymes and serves as a chant – na’am, wahda wataniyya, islamiiyya wa-masihiiyya)

    Twice he repeated the slogan.

18. For one striking example, see his Nakba speech, 15 May 1998.


Has the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Become Islamic? Fatah, Islam, and the Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades

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Many indications in the latest round of conflict between Israel and the Palestinians suggest the Islamization of the conflict on the Palestinian side. How Fatah, the nationalist faction that has dominated the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and its principle fighting arm during the hostilities between Israel and the Palestinians since 2000, the Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades, have related to Islam is a crucial dimension in answering the question of the extent to which the conflict has become Islamic. This article argues on the basis of an analysis of martyrs’ obituaries published by the Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades that though they were often steeped in Islamic symbols, the considerable variation suggests that the use of Islamic symbols and allusions employed by the Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades are affective rather than programmatic, designed to mobilize the public against Israel and thwart the expansion of the Islamic movements internally rather than to impact on the character of Fatah and the larger Palestinian political entity. While mobilization employing Islamic symbols is effective domestically, it is costly in an international system committed to a society based on states where raison d’état subordinates religious beliefs and goals. In the international arena, the state-centered nationalist discourse provides an edge over the Palestinian fundamentalist competition.

Many indications in the latest round of conflict between Israel and the Palestinians suggest that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict reflects, if not a civilizational fault line between Jewish Zionism and Islam, at the very least the Islamization of the conflict from a Palestinian perspective. First, its Islamization is suggested by the very title or name Palestinians and other analysts have given the present outbreak of hostilities that began at the end of September 2000: “the al-Aqsa intifada.” ¹ Al-Aqsa is the name of the mosque situated on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, holy both to Jews and Muslims, where the first acts of violence took place. Most Palestinians claim that the visit by then Israeli opposition leader Ariel Sharon to the Temple Mount (al-Haram al-Sharif) provoked the violence. However, Israel and some Palestinians, including some who were close to Arafat, claim that the violence was preplanned.² Second, in the negotiations between Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian chairman Yasser Arafat at the Camp David summit in July 2000, sovereignty over the Temple Mount issue was purportedly one of the key bones of contention between Israeli and Palestinian negotiators.³ Third, the violence on the Temple Mount led to the most widespread demonstrations and riots among Israel’s Arab citizens since the establishment of the state. In the course of four days of violence,

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twelve Arab citizens were killed. Even the Arab Palestinian “nationalist” press within Israel, which usually downplays the religious overtones of the conflict, had to report that the chants heard during the riots and demonstrations were mostly religious in nature. One of the most popular slogans was: “Haibar, Haibar, Ya Yahud, Jaish Muhammad saYad,” (“Haibar, Haibar, oh Jews recall, the army of Muhammad will return”). The chant refers to a battle in 628 C.E. between Muhammad and the Jewish tribe of Haibar, in which the Muslim army utterly defeated the tribe. In addition, few can deny the importance of the suicide bombers in the current wave of violence and, initially at least, the religious sentiments motivating them.

Never before has Fatah’s political and military preeminence been so politically challenged as in the latest round of conflict by the Islamic movements. Polls conducted by Palestinian research centers in the past consistently showed a wide gap between support for Arafat and Ahmad Yassin, the assassinated leader of Hamas, and on the “party” level much wider support for Fatah than for Hamas and Islamic Jihad combined. Before the conflict, 40 percent on average supported Fatah compared to 16–18 percent for Hamas. During the recent outbreak of violence, the gap in support between Fatah and Hamas has virtually closed (29 percent compared to 27 percent). Support for Arafat declined from 40 percent before the outbreak of violence to 24.5 percent in June 2002. Finally, the very emergence of Fatah’s major fighting arm, called the Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades (Kata’ib Shuhada al-Aqsa), has suggested that not only has the arena as a whole been Islamized but the very organization that bore the banner of Palestinian nationalism itself is conforming to the winds of change.

The following article analyzes whether the emergence of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades (henceforth the Al-Aqsa Brigades) as the major fighting arm of Fatah reflects a fundamental ideological change within Fatah. Another option could be that the change in name from the more neutral and opaque Fatah Tanzim (Organization) was a means of mobilizing larger numbers of Palestinians, who would be attracted to a more Islamic name, yet not at the expense of sacrificing the basically nationalist identity of Fatah. The article begins with a brief analysis of the importance of Islamic themes, symbols, and sentiments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; moves on to analyze Fatah’s specific relationship to religion and religious trends within the wider Palestinian movement; explains briefly the origins of the movement; and finally analyzes the ideology and practices of Fatah and the Al-Aqsa Brigades in the present conflict within the context of a national movement seeking redress in an international system committed to a system of states and raison d’état over religious considerations.

Religious Themes and Symbols in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

When politicians, journalists, and commentators began characterizing the latest round of violence between Palestinians and Israel as the Al-Aqsa Intifada, thus wedging a uniquely religious term (al-Aqsa) with a political term (intifada), they were hardly being original in the context of the overall conflict. Many previous stages of this bi-communal struggle crystallized over religious sites, as well as on various religious occasions. In fact, the first Arab riots against the Jews in mandatory Palestine erupted in April 1920 as participants came back to Jerusalem from the burial site of al-Nabi Musa (Moses the Prophet), which according to Muslim tradition is situated on the road leading to Jericho.
The next—far more intensive and persistent—wave of violence in the summer of 1929 focused on what Arabs perceived as Jewish attempts to change the traditional status quo along the Wailing Wall. This religious site covers part of one of the four walls surrounding the Temple Mount, upon which the Al-Aqsa Mosque is situated. Jewish worshippers, supported by the right-wing Zionist Betar movement (whose members bore flags with the Star of David), amassed along the length of the wall on the fast day commemorating the destruction of the Second Temple—bringing with them an ark for the Torah scrolls and seats for the worshippers. The Palestinian Arab community, led by Hajj Amin al-Husayni, the president of the Supreme Muslim Council, had for years been trying to mobilize the Arab population against what he perceived as Jewish attempts to wrest control of the Temple Mount. He used reports of the waving of nationalist flags and the bringing of furniture, to stir anti-Jewish sentiment. Hostilities against both Zionists and anti-Zionist ultra-orthodox Jews resulted in 133 killed and 339 wounded in a community numbering approximately 200,000. There were 116 Arabs killed and 232 wounded, mostly in the course of British police and paramilitary efforts to quell the violence. Because of the intensity, geographical distribution, and organized nature of the violence, many scholars view the Wailing Wall riots of 1928–29 as the first real major confrontation in the bi-communal struggle in Palestine between Jews and Arabs.

After the violence abated, Hajj Amin al-Husayni recast Jewish attempts to change the status quo as an attempt to destroy the Muslim sites on the Temple Mount and rebuild the temple. He then went on to try to rally the Muslim world, calling for it to save Al-Aqsa. In 1931 he succeeded in convening an international Islamic conference attended by representatives from twenty-two countries. The Jewish religious threat to places of worship was one of Hajj Amin’s favorite themes in mobilizing Palestine’s Arab population as well.

The cry to save Al-Aqsa was heard once again when Israel took over the West Bank in 1967 and, with greater intensity yet, with the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) after the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993. Arab Palestinians viewed an attempt by an Australian citizen to set fire to the Al-Aqsa Mosque in August 1969 as yet another attempt to rebuild the temple even though the perpetrator was a Christian. In September 1996, the security organs of the recently constituted PA and other Palestinian irregulars reacted violently in response to the opening of a sightseeing tunnel along the foundations of the western wall of the Temple Mount. Palestinians, especially Hamas and Islamic Jihad but members of the PA as well, accused the Israelis of digging the tunnel with the aim of undermining the foundations on the Temple Mount in order to destroy the Islamic holy sites. Hamas and Islamic Jihad are the two major Palestinian fundamentalist movements in the territories. Hamas, by far the larger, is the acronym of the “Islamic Resistance Movement” in Arabic, which appropriately makes up the word “zeal.”

Holy sites both under Israeli rule and in areas under jurisdiction of the PA continued to be arenas of intense inter-communal violence. In May 1980, Fatah members—who were also students of the Department of Religion in Hebron University (Jam'i at al-Khalil)—killed five yeshiva (religious seminar) students in Hebron (al-Khalil), an incident that reflected the homogeneous religious background of the settlers and the settlement drive in general. On October 8, 1990, seventeen Arabs were killed on the Temple Mount during the holy month of Ramadan after throwing stones at hundreds of Jewish worshippers celebrating the Feast of the Tabernacles at the Wailing Wall sixty feet below. Four years later, a Jewish
physician, Baruch Goldstein, murdered twenty-nine Arab worshipers in the Cave of the Patriarchs in the now-partitioned city of Hebron, considered holy to both religions.\textsuperscript{17} The latter events reflected the fact that a number of burial sites in the West Bank have become contested territory since Israel occupied it in 1967. Israeli settlement buildings in the West Bank has been accompanied by claims on, and the “settling” of, burial sites. Kever Yosef, Joseph’s assumed burial site and home to a yeshiva, became an Israeli enclave after Israeli withdrawal from the city of Nablus in 1996. It was overwhelmed in October 2000 by Palestinian irregulars at the beginning of the present hostilities.\textsuperscript{18} Contention over the holy site has not been settled since. Jewish worshippers have attempted repeatedly to pray at the site whenever Israeli troops reenter the city to conduct search-and-destroy missions.\textsuperscript{19} The yeshiva, formerly based in the holy site, continues to function in a nearby Jewish settlement and vows to return at the first opportunity. A third burial site, Rachel’s tomb, at the entrance of Bethlehem, has also been the scene of intense military and political rivalry between Israel and the PA as each claims jurisdiction over it. According to the Torah, these three burial sites formed the axis of the Jewish patriarchs’ peregrinations in the land of Canaan. Thus, many Israelis regard them as the heart of sacred territory and ancient Jewish history. Despite the sacredness of Joseph’s tomb, the Israel Defense Force (IDF) did not permit Jews to return when it reoccupied Nablus more or less permanently in June 2002.\textsuperscript{20} This was the only area Israel was willing to relinquish during the last outbreak of violence, indicating that at least from the Israeli perspective, there was a tendency to minimize the religious overtones of the conflict.

**Nationalism and Religion in Fatah**

In the Middle East, with the possible exception of modern Turkish nationalism, it is rare to find a republican form of nationalism that divorces itself entirely from religious sources. This was all the more true of the Fatah movement. To begin with, Fatah’s very name is religiously inspired. The original acrynom for the *Harakat al-Tahrir al-Watani al-Filastini*, HATF, means in Arabic “death,” hardly an appropriate logo for a movement that aspired to lead Palestinians to victory over the state of Israel. It was altered to Fatah, an acronym which means “conquest,” used almost always in the context of the early conquests of Islam. The word also evokes a well-known chapter in the Koran.

Terms such as jihad, mujahideen, and fedayeen appeared regularly in Fatah manifestos and announcements. Fatah’s relationship to Islam, even to political Islam, also runs through its leadership. Ziyad Abu Amer, a former scholar from Birzeit University and presently a member of the Palestinian legislative council, provides one possible reason. In a book on the sources of Palestinian nationalism in Gaza, from which most Fatah founding members emanated, he writes: “There is no doubt whatsoever that the founding elements emerged from the womb of the Muslim Brotherhood.”\textsuperscript{21} Especially active in that organization were Khalil al-Wazir (Abu Pazir) and Salah Khalaf (Abu Iyad). Several prominent Fatah members of the next generation—such as Munir Shafiq, Hamdi Tamimi, and Mohammad Hassan Bhais—have become religious and preach a synthesis between Islam and Palestinian nationalism.\textsuperscript{22} Others, such as Gzai al-Husayni and Bassam Sultan, aided the formation of the Jihad al-Islami.\textsuperscript{23}
Nor was this a phenomenon limited to the command's middle and lower ranks. Arafat's speeches, especially in the last decade, are replete with quotes from the Koran, religious terms and symbols, and occasionally oral teachings imputed to Muhammad (the hadith). In the course of ten speeches he gave on principal commemorative days—the founding of Fatah on January 1 of each year, on al-Nakba Day on May 14, and Declaration of Independence Day in November between 1994 and 2001—Arafat quoted nineteen different verses. Seven of the nineteen verses he quoted more than one time for a total of forty-two times, an average of nearly four verses over the course of one speech. The speeches are very short—between eight hundred and one thousand words delivered in the course of fifteen to twenty minutes. The impression given is of speeches infused with religious content. In almost all the speeches he begins with at least one verse and ends with a verse. The verses are thus strategically placed to provide the overall framework for the internal contents of the speech, with the dominant theme being a downtrodden people triumphing by liberating Jerusalem and the Haram al-Sharif as illustrious Islamic forebears did before them. The following is one typical illustration:

Until we meet in Palestine, until we meet in Palestine, in Holy Jerusalem in Holy Jerusalem, the first of the directions of prayer and the third of the holy places, the [sight of the] nocturnal ascent of Muhammad the Prophet, May God Grant him peace, the abode of our Master the Messiah Peace be Upon Him, to the meeting place there, there there, together and in unison, until victory, until victory, until victory.

Perhaps awkward to read, the oral cadence of this uninterrupted flow is emotionally powerful. Arafat often repeated key phrases two or three times, a common oratorical device in many cultural contexts. In as much as one can separate religious from nationalist messages, in this particular example the nationalist chants are nevertheless more marked. The repetition of "until victory" that concludes the speech echoes an older PLO slogan "revolution until victory" (al-thawra hata al-nasr). Both the religiously embedded and nationalist slogans reflect movement toward Jerusalem, one can even say a religiously inspired crusade, and a clear emphasis on victory that echoes a slogan from more militant times in the history of the PLO and Fatah.

Equally prominent are his opening and closing salutations. In the written versions of all his speeches as they appeared in the newspapers, the opening verse from the Koran is preceded by the traditional salutation "In the name of Allah, the Merciful and Compassionate" (bismi allah al-rahaman al-rahim). At the end of each speech, following the last verse, he almost always cited the salutation, "Verily the great God speaks the Truth, peace and Allah's compassion be upon you as well as his blessings" (sadaqa alahu al-adhim wal-salam alatikum warahmat allah wabaraka-tuhu). Frequently, the phrase "Verily the great God speaks the Truth, peace" appears in the middle of the speech after a quotation from a verse. This addendum both to the salutations and in the middle of the text is obviously meant to enhance the credibility of the message and its aura as absolute truth.

Sensitivity to religion was also reflected in the organizational dynamics of Fatah's affiliated institutions. Fatah's shabiba (youth) movement in the West Bank and in the late 1970s that consisted of Gaza shabiba Committees for Social Action (Lijn al-Shabib lil-Amal al-Ijiima i) organized separate structures for boys and
girls—in contrast to the frameworks set up by the communists, the PLFP, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFDP), which were mixed. Fatah’s student movement acknowledged the importance of religion by organizing events on important commemoration dates in the Islamic calendar with traditional Islamic content. Again, the contrast with the smaller movements of the Left was striking. At the same time, the Shabiba Student Movement (Harakat al-Shabiba al-Tullabiyya) did not segregate between the sexes and in fact opposed attempts by the Islamic movements to impose segregation in universities in the West Bank.

Finally in the mid-1980s, partially in an attempt to meet the growing challenge of the Islamic opposition movements, Fatah helped set up a “nationalist” Islamic jihad movement called the Saraya al-Jihad al-Islami, supported Shaykh Asad Bayyud al-Tamimi’s Harakat al-Jihad–Bayt al-Maqdis, and later sponsored yet another organization called the al-Jihad al-Islami-Kata‘ib al-Aqsa. Though all three organizations enjoyed close relations with Fatah, they regarded themselves as independent organizations.

Ideologically, neither Fatah (nor its leadership within the PLO) employed the term “secular” (almanii) in public discourse. This was especially striking during the debates held in the late 1960s and early 1970s that characterized the nature of the future Palestinian entity. The Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine employed the term to describe the future Palestinian state. Fatah skirted the issue by sticking to its position that delving into the nature of the relationship between state and society along any dimension (class, religion, political nature of the future regime) diverted energies away from the primary task—defeating the Zionist enemy. Arafat, for example, was reported to have stated on the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine’s (DFLP) idea of a “secular democratic state in Palestine” that “I am certain that this is a distortion of the democracy we proclaim.” Though ideologically Fatah has always concentrated on the struggle against Israel—and argued in its early debates with the various fronts for the liberation of Palestine to delay discussion over the internal characteristics of Palestinian society and its institutions until liberation—the symbols the movement has used are infused with religion. Whereas the factions on the Left used a terminology almost exclusively taken from the European revolutionary tradition, Fatah borrowed from Islamic culture as well.

Yet with all its acknowledgement of Islam’s importance, Fatah’s basic conception of Islam and things Islamic was nationalist. Islam was part of the nationalist heritage both of Palestinian nationalism (wataniiyya) and the way that nationalism was linked to the larger Arab nation (gaumiyya). Never in Fatah ideology was Islam construed as the normative and legal basis for Palestinian society in the way that Islamic movements such as Hamas perceived it in, for example, the covenant Hamas disseminated in the territories in the summer of 1988. The true litmus test between the two organizations relates to means and ends. Whereas for Fatah, Islam is basically a means, for Hamas the Islamic normative order and collective boundary is an end they aspire to realize. As many of the terms Fatah employed were cultural, they appeared within the context of a secular, though by no means antireligious, nationalism that focused on national liberation of a territory, political institutions, and a common national belonging between Palestinian Christians and Muslims.

A comparative reading between Fatah’s founding document with Hamas’s makes this altogether clear, at least conceptually and formally. In the Basic Order, modified in 1989 and mistakenly translated in Fatah’s official Web site as a constitution, only two brief references to religion appear. In article 9, liberating Palestine is
regarded as “an Arab, religious and human obligation.” Article 13 guarantees “protecting the citizens’ legal and equal [sic] rights without any racial or religious discrimination”. In neither case, does the word Islamic appear but rather the generic dīnī (religious). The latter is a universal referent, which in the context of Palestinian society refers to Christians as well. In the Hamas constitution, by contrast, Islamic fiqh and sharia are the constitutive basis of the polity.

The dichotomy should not, however, be overstated when it comes to real-life political positions and behavior. A forty-two-page document entitled Strategic Moves, written in late 1992 and which still appears on the main Fatah Web site, ends with several sentences which, if left unidentified, could easily have been identified as bearing the imprint of Hamas, both regarding its religious tenor and the political objectives:

It is the will of the Palestinian people, the will of a nation of giants which will decide the level of stability in the area of the Middle East. It is capable of complete escalation, employing all the means of confrontation and struggle, in a situation in which the fixed rights will be ignored to a degree unacceptable to the Palestinian people. And it is also able to interact in complete unison with the will of the peoples of the area, with the Arab nation, in dictating the state of the Palestinian peace and the Arab peace. The peace of al-Quds, the peace of the brave which they were able throughout history to fuse into the civilization of the Arab and Islamic nation all the transient attackers and to protect the ancient human legacy in this area, the area of the first direction of prayer and the third of the noble holy places (al-haramain al-sharifain), which Allah blessed around it. He blessed all of Palestine from the river to the sea, from the sea to victory. (In Arabic the last clause rhymes—“min al-nahr ila’l-bahr, min al-bahr ila’l-nasr”).

Not only did this document construe the liberation of all of Palestine as the most fundamental goal of the movement, it perceived the source of legitimacy for attaining this objective as being rooted in the Koran, Islam’s sacred text. The “Palestine that God blessed” in the closing sentence of the document refers to a verse in the Koran located in what is sometimes called the Chapter of the Children of Israel or the Nocturnal Ascent. The verse reads as follows:

Glory be to him, who carried His servant by night from the Holy Mosque to the Further Mosque the precincts of which We have blessed that We might show him some of Our signs.

The mosque in both classical and popular exegesis is identified with the nocturnal ascent of Muhammad from the precincts of the Mecca “Holy Mosque” to the “further mosque” long identified with the Al-Aqsa Mosque on the Haram al-Sharif. The night of the nocturnal ascent is an official holiday in the Islamic calendar. In the 1920s and 1930s, Hajj Amin al-Husayni, the Arab Palestinian leader, frequently quoted the opening of this verse and extended its meaning to include all of Palestine. He then claimed that all of Palestine was an Islamic endowment, inalienable and therefore unnamenable to territorial compromise. The Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) later picked up on the theme and formalized it
in its constitution that it disseminated in the West Bank and Gaza in the summer of 1988 when the first intifada was at its height. Arafat quoted this verse once in a speech he made in Ramallah on December 31, 1995, to commemorate the Fatah takeoff when he extolled the Palestinian people, especially those in Jerusalem, to participate in the coming elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council in order to defend the “holy land” (al-ard al-muqaddasa). This document indicates that the idea that the holiness of Palestine made it inalienable had been accepted by Fatah as well.

Essentially, Fatah’s attitudes and uses of religion place it at a midpoint on the spectrum between left-wing factions such as the DFLP (which seeks a secular Palestinian state based on the Turkish model) and Hamas, which is dedicated (albeit in low-key fashion) to establishing a theocracy. On the instrumental level, Fatah uses religious belief and emotion as a mobilizing tool on behalf of Palestinian nationalist goals. In the realm of ideas, Fatah recognizes the importance of Islam as an important component of the collective identity and culture of Palestinians, most of whom are either traditional or devout Muslims. Fatah’s instrumental use of Islam was best reflected in the creation of two fighting arms during the latest round of conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. By far the more important organization to emerge was the Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades. Yet there were also the Brigades of the Return (Kata’ib al-Awda), established under the leadership of Husayn al-Sheikh. The right of return refers to the insistence that Palestinian refugees living both in diaspora and in the territories be allowed to return to their original places of residence within the borders of mandatory Palestine. The basis for this claim is a clause in UN Resolution 194 from December 1948.

The Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades—Islamic or Nationalist?

In March 2002, two reports on the Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades appeared in the American media. In the first, reporter Matthew Kalman wrote that “unlike two other major Palestinian militant groups, the Islamic fundamentalist Hamas and Islamic Jihad, the brigade is secular.” In the second, Khaled Abu Toameh and Larry Derfner described how “in downtown Ramallah Manara Square, dozens of al-Aqsa men shouted ‘Allahu Akbar’ (‘God is Great’) as they took turns firing AK-47 and M-16 rifles at Israeli tanks about 200 yards away.” In the organization’s training camp in Gaza recruits told the reporters “we are all sacrificing our lives for al-Aqsa.” The Al-Aqsa Brigades first became known to the public when their “anti-corruption” unit, they claimed, gunned down Hisham Miki, the head of the Palestinian Authority Television Authority in Gaza on January 18, 2001. The organization differed from the Islamic Jihad formations Fatah supported in the past in that it is emerged within Fatah itself. Then which of the two reports is correct?

On the one hand, there can be little doubt that the name “Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades” is infused with Islamic meaning. More Islamic still is its logo, a relief of the Temple Mount (in actual fact Umar’s Mosque rather than the visually inferior Al-Aqsa) framed partially by two AK-47 rifles, above which appears a complete verse from the Koran. Below the relief is found the name of the organization. Nor can there be any doubt that Fatah was responding to widespread feelings that Palestinian political life should be more Islamic. A poll conducted in March 2000, six months before the outburst of violence surrounding the Al-Aqsa Mosque, showed
that an overwhelming percentage of the respondents (85.8 percent) felt that the PA should be more religious than it was.  

Certainly, religious content is richer and more prominent in the preamble and announcements of the Al-Aqsa Brigades than in the commentaries and documents brought out by the various branches of the Fatah movement, just as the name is so strikingly different from previous Fatah armed groups. Stylistically, the preamble is embellished with religious trappings similar to material produced by Hamas. For example, below the title appears the prelude Bismi Allah al-Rahman al-Rahim, followed by a verse from the Koran. Three more verses appear in the subsequent 3,000-word essay, each at the end of a subchapter. During the first intifada, the names of the various fighting arms that operated under the Fatah umbrella reflected a borrowing from Western and third world revolutionary and nationalist legacies. The inspiration for the name "Black Panther" might conceivably be linked to the Black Panthers of the United States, though it also might (as with the Hawks) be due simply to figures that denote power and ferociousness. Similarly, "Red Eagle" might have been borrowed from the Marxist revolutionary tradition. Regarding the term "Popular Army", which incidentally continued to appear in the sign-off of Al-Aqsa announcements, there can be little doubt where its origins lie.

On the other hand, the instrumental nature of the use of religion is no less pronounced, as the preamble that appears on the organization's Web site makes clear:

It is altogether natural that the (Fatah) movement should reproduce itself in a new cloth and in a new framework that interacts with the changes that have occurred... as an organization that has always interacted pragmatically under changing circumstances yet at the same time remaining loyal to the Palestinian problem, national liberation and "long-term popular war."  

Under the heading entitled "from al-Asifa to the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades" (Min al-Asifa ila Kata'ib Shuhada al-Aqsa), it then goes on to claim that this reproduction under new names dates back to the beginning of Fatah. The Al-Asifa (Storm) forces were Fatah's first fighting organization, which initiated Palestinian guerrilla action against Israel in January 1965:

The Fatah movement took off and renewed itself continuously. First it was the al-Asifa Movement under the leadership of Yasir Arafat. Abu Yusuf al-Najjar...and their colleagues...In the first intifada, the Shabiba Committees for Social Action, were a Fatah creation. Groups [committed to] local military resistance action appeared like the Black Panther, the Hawks, the Red Eagle and the Popular Army. A large segment of the leaders and heroes...met martyrdom. These and the likes of them represent the legions that imbibed and partook from the water of the holy revolution and the fragrance of heaven until the creative horizon burst forth to produce the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade, to announce, renew and continue the procession.  

According to the preamble, Fatah constantly reproduces itself to go along with the changing times, but its essence remains unchanged.
Analyzing the Obituary Notices of the Martyrs

The element of mobilizing the masses is not only reflected in the specific Islamization of the fighting arm rather than the parent organization, but also in the material disseminated to mobilize men and women to resist the Israelis. Not all the military announcements expressed the same amount of religious conviction or prejudice. Thus, for example, apart from a secondary heading with the phrase “Allah is Great” repeated three times, the press release invoking the martyrdom of Abd al-Salam Sadiq Mari Hasuna from Bayt Amrin near Nablus on November 17, 2002, is almost bereft of anything specifically Islamic.\(^{50}\) The enemy is referred to as “the Zionist entity.”

Only slightly more Islamic in tone is the announcement commemorating the martyrdom of Wafa Ali Idris from al-Amari refugee camp, the first successful female suicide bomber.\(^{51}\) It begins with the prelude “In the name of God the Compassionate and Merciful,” followed by the first part of the verse “Say: Work; and God will surely see your work and His Messenger, and the believers…” (9:106). Otherwise, the body of the text is free of Islamic allusions. Instead, the Al-Aqsa Brigades introduced for the first time the motto that subsequently appeared at the end of most of the announcements: “The Martyrs of Al-Aqsa Brigades, who do what they say and fulfill what they promised.” (In Arabic it rhymes—ithan qalat, faalat, waithan wa adat, awfulat). This is certainly a modern secular slogan.

Both contrast sharply with the Al-Aqsa Brigades subsequent legacy (wasiya) left by Said Ibrahim Said Ramadan, the son of “steadfast al-Tell,” a village near Nablus, who was killed in a shooting attack in Jerusalem after killing two and wounding thirty. Written in the first person, possibly by the assailant himself, the statement condemned “the enemies of God, the Jews, the pigs Sharon and his government and gang of murderous gangsters—who with the support of the apex of apostasy, America, carry out the most heinous of crimes.” Its author was also obviously motivated by deep religious conviction: “I have donated my spirit to God Almighty to fight the enemies of God, beseeching God to accept me and to merit me a martyr in Heaven, God willing.” He signed off “the living martyr (Said Ramadan), the son of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades.”\(^{52}\) Barring one mention of the Palestinian people and even that reference is qualified by the distinctively Islamic adjective al-murabit—tied to God), there is nothing particularly nationalist about the departing message. The statement could have easily been made by a suicide bomber belonging to Hamas’s Izz al-Din Brigades that are in Filastin al-Muslima, the Hamas monthly published in London and disseminated in the territories. The Al-Aqsa Brigades’ “military announcement” the following day announcing Ramadan’s death played down the religious elements considerably. There were no verses from the Koran and the enemies of Allah were no longer the Jews writ large but “pigs Sharon, Mofaz [the Israeli Army’s chief of staff] and his government.”\(^{53}\) The very fact that the Islamic content of the announcements changes from incident to incident, from one suicide bomber to the other, reflects a pragmatic rather than substantive use of Islam. Where the suicide bomber (and most probably his immediate environment) is motivated by Islamic conviction, the Al-Aqsa Brigades reciprocate accordingly. Where the family in question is less devout, the emphasis (in as much one can divorce the two) is more nationalist.

Variation between the announcements could also be found regarding the final political objectives of the violence. The military announcement from the end of
May 2002 began with a statement "Oh Zionists depart from our land because we will not stop as long as there is a rapacious Occupier on our land," leaving the possibility that it might be referring exclusively to the West Bank and Gaza. The announcement a week later (June 6) announcing the attack on an Israeli bus killing nine justified it on the grounds of the "aggression reflected by the occupation of Palestine." A month later, a similar military announcement was even more explicit stating that the attack "emphasizes how impossible it was to smother the intifada until the decimation of the occupation and the elimination of this entity from the land of Palestine."

Between the Islamization of the Brigades and Secular Fatah

There can be little doubt that the emergence of the Al-Aqsa Brigades is part of a deliberate attempt to respond to the religious convictions so prevalent in Palestinian society and the growing yet limited popularity of the Islamic movements. I stress limited because as much as polls show a more balanced support between Fatah and the Islamic movements, the largest single group polled still favor "independents"—politicians that are not affiliated with Fatah, other PLO factions, or the Islamic movements. In other words, these polls demonstrate growing disillusionment with all institutionalized Palestinian political organizations.

Perhaps partially for this reason, the "parent" organization Fatah—represented by a variety of institutions such as the Central Committee, the Central Council, and the Higher Committees of the West Bank and Gaza—continues through formal announcements from these institutions or through member interviews to represent a broader, if not more secular and nationalist, narrative.

A summary of an interview with Hani al-Hasan, a member of Fatah's Central Committee, in Al-Quds is typical of many interviews with Fatah personalities such Marwan Barghuthi, Amin Maqbul, and others. The interview with Hasan, like interviews with the others, is notable for its omission of anything specifically Islamic:

Hani al-Hasan was addressing a meeting of members of the Palestine National Council [PNC] in Amman yesterday. He said that the Palestinian leadership is very proud of the intifadah and that it will reap the fruits of the intifadah. He added that the Palestinian leadership has been aware of the fact that the intifadah will produce fruits. Therefore, the Palestinian leadership enhanced its political demands.

Al-Hasan asserted that the intifadah will not stop unless real gains are achieved, such as the Israeli withdrawal from all the territories Israel occupied in 1967, fixing a date for the declaration of the Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital, removal of the Israeli settlements and fulfilling other demands.

This omission of anything specifically Islamic is equally true of the copious material presented on the general Fatah Web site and that produced by the Higher Movement Committee for Gaza. The contrast with the announcements of the Al-Aqsa Brigades is all the more glaring if one takes into account these organizations' serial publications as well, such as Al-Nashra al-Markaziyya, Fatah's newsletter or Fatah announcements that often correspond to events that form the basis for the Al-Aqsa Brigades announcements. Just as the latter are infused with Islamic content, the Fatah general announcements are bereft of them.
Explaining the Paradox

There are two main reasons accounting for the gap between infusion of Islamic symbols on the operative and tactical level and their conspicuous absence in either internal policy forums or pronouncements of Fatah personalities relating to Palestinian foreign relations, the peace process, demands on the Europeans, and the relationship to the United States.

Islamic symbols and references are important as tools of mobilization. At the same time, Fatah wants to clearly demonstrate that its basic message and vision of the state is nationalist rather than religious and as such clearly distinguishable from Hamas and Islamic Jihad not only in terms of political objectives on matters relating to Israel and Islamic statehood, but also in characterizing the nature of the future Palestinian state.

Its recourse to nationalist secular discourse is even more striking in foreign and international affairs—for good reason. Since the nineteenth century, if not since Westphalia, the international system has been dominated by states which, for all the variation they have shown in the relationship between religion and the public weal within their domestic structures, are adamantly opposed to the creation of theocratic states. 60 By theocratic states, one means those in which religious law is constitutionally supreme. Such states propagate the faith in a way that might potentially undermine existing nation-states. If some tolerance toward theocracy and fundamentalism was countenanced in the early part of the twentieth century (in the creation of Saudi Arabia, for example) it has attenuated considerably since then.

The norms these core states have created and propagated are not only territorially centered, but man-made and secular. From Wilson’s fourteen principles to the United Nations (UN) Charter, the ideas and values expressed in these documents relate to republican and liberal ideas, which for the most part clash with the basic propositions articulated by Islamic, Jewish, and perhaps Christian political fundamentalists. Consider the following: whereas in the international system, territorial sovereignty of the state was considered (until recently at least) exclusive and all religions equal and to be tolerated, in theocratic thought the religious identity of the state is seen as exclusive and dominant. Other religions must, by definition, be discriminated against. A people living on a certain piece of land may make a claim to self-determination on the basis of being ethnically or nationally different, but not on the basis of religious differences. Religious sects can demand tolerance, but not political satisfaction.

Nor is the issue only a matter of who wields power in the system and structures its norms. The secular nature of the international system is also reflected in the values propagated by the international organizations and the types of projects and institutions they foster. Even in a day and age when the diaspora of vast numbers of Muslims and other members of non-European-centered religions foster the growth of international religious nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the overwhelming bulk of financial resources are still in the hands of liberally minded organizations. Because these core states and NGOs, motivated by liberal or republican values, are ultimately responsible in most instances for bequeathing the territorial state, movements aspiring to create states must play according to their rules. This is also true for most states in the system. Even an oil-rich state such as Iran bears the brunt of its theocratic claims and constitution.

This is all the more true for the Palestinians, who were in any case latecomers to state building and must play by the secular norms international actors impose upon
them. No state actor, with the possible exception of Iran, will support the Palestinian cause in the international arena, based on the claim that Palestine was ruled by Muslim rulers in the past, and has therefore become an Islamic endowment that is inalienable and not negotiable. By contrast, a Palestinian claim to self-determination on the basis that Palestinians form the majority of the inhabitants of the West Bank and Gaza, and that their claim from this perspective had been recognized by the UN in the past, does carry political weight. This is especially true when the normative territorial claim is backed by a certain degree of political power. The Palestinians argue, with some degree of credibility, that even if they cannot force Israel to withdraw, they can continue to punish it and place the larger region in a state of tension that makes it worthwhile for the international community to explore ways to meet their national aspirations. And if this were true before the Al Qaeda attacks on September 11, it is more the case now that the international system will respond more affirmatively to nationalist rather than to religious movements. In other words, Fatah realizes that it has a considerable advantage over its rivals in Hamas and al-Jihad al-Islami by remaining secular.

Conclusion

Circumscribing Islamic symbols and Koranic verses to its fighting arm, the Al-Aqsa Brigades demonstrate that Fatah, particularly its policy-making structures such as the Central Committee, perceives the change as a means of mobilization and recruitment rather than a reflection of an essential change in the character of the movement. In any event, none of the Islamic quotes from verses in the Koran and the hadith that appear in the logo, posters, and announcements of the Al-Aqsa Brigades have much bearing on the legal norms and institutions of the actual Palestinian political system. The Islamic symbols and allusions are affective rather than programmatic, designed to mobilize the public against Israel and thwart the expansion of the Islamic movements internally rather than to impact on the character of the larger Palestinian political entity. The creation of the Al-Aqsa Brigades, then, reflects on the growing societal salience of political Islam but it hardly softens the great divide between the two competing movements, the nationalist and the Islamic, over the character of the future entity. Fatah continues to leave open the question whether that entity will be a sharia state or a nation-state that combines the universal with the particularistic. Its continued silence on the matter indicates that it remains loyal to the nationalist rather than sharia-theocratic model.

Fatah’s relationship to religion in many ways conforms to the experiences of many Arab states such as Syria, Egypt, and Jordan. In the face of growing salience of Islam, General Hafiz al-Asad was portrayed in the official Syrian armed forces journal as a devout Muslim; in Egypt, it led to a revision in 1980 in the constitution that proclaimed Islamic jurisprudential principles no longer merely a source of legislation but the major source. Meanwhile the Hashemite rulers of Jordan proclaim prominently their descent to the Prophet but keep their distance from making sharia state law. As in the case of Fatah, Islamization should be perceived more as a means of cushioning fundamentalist blows rather than a true change of heart.

Avoiding linking theocratic content to overarching goals or making it the basis of legitimacy for governmental institutions makes even more sense regarding a nationalist movement that has yet to achieve statehood. Wedding theocracy with nationalism in international forums hardly makes sense in a unipolar world
dominated by a state that is waging a war mainly on Islamic terrorism. To the contrary, maintaining a secular discourse in regional and international forums serves as an asset in the arsenal of Fatah and the PLO in its internal struggle with Hamas and al-Jihad al-Islami.

Notes


2. Mamduh Nufal, a prominent Palestinian commentator and advisor, emphasized the Palestinian Authority’s role in the outbreak of the intifada in a roundtable on the subject: “This current movement is distinguishable from the first intifada and is perhaps unique altogether. From the beginning, this movement was led and accompanied by the forces of the PA. It is not a mass movement divorced from the Authority nor did it burst in isolation from it, but to the contrary, took off as a result of a central decision taken by the authority before it became a popular movement. It occurred directly during Sharon’s visit to al-Aqsa, when the organs of the political and security organs of the PA decided to defend al-Aqsa. Yasser Arafat regarded the visit to al-Aqsa a volatile point sufficient not only to ignite the fire on Palestinian soil but to inflame the situation outside the borders of Palestine. Decisions were taken regarding operational preparations, meetings were held for the participating forces of the Authority and it was decided to mobilize them towards al-Aqsa on Friday.... Directives were made to the security organs to enter it and defend it.” “Nadwa: Wujhat Nazar fi Tatawwurat al-Intifada wa-Ahdaifha,” Majallat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya, no. 47 (2001): 44. Nabil Amru (Amer), the former minister of parliamentary affairs in the Palestinian Authority and a close confidant of Arafat, was even blunter: “The intifada, all of it, is the making of the Authority, even if one ought not, out of sheer political wisdom, to adopt or say it.... but it is known, and those that know it thoroughly are the Israelis. This is why they know where to strike. The essential foe for them is the Authority.... The question is can we as the Authority adopt this within the political margin of maneuver offered. I think the answer is no.” “Hawar Sakhin Bayna Nabil Amru wa Islah Jad,” Majallat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya, no. 50 (2002): 13.


4. This series of events eclipsed by far the violent events of Land Day on March 30, 1976, in which six of Israel’s Arab citizens were killed in demonstrations that lasted a single day.


8. JMCC Poll, Jerusalem: Jerusalem Media and Communications Center, no. 45 (May 29–31, June 1–3, 2002).


10. Ibid., 269.


13. Nissim Mishal, Those Were the Years (Tel Aviv: Yedihot Ahronot Press, 1998), 155. On this incident’s continuing impact, see the report on a recent rally in Gaza sponsored by the PA’s ministry of endowments and religious affairs that commemorated thirty-three years since the burning in Al-Hayat al-Jadida (July 22, 2002).


17. Ibid.
24. The following table lists the speeches by day of commemoration and the date the speeches were published in al-Ayyam, a Palestinian newspaper published in Ramallah near Jerusalem.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fatah commemoration day</th>
<th>Nakba (Disaster) day</th>
<th>Declaration of Independence</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1/1/1996 (Qalquilya)</td>
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<td>11/15/1999</td>
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<td>1/1/1999</td>
<td></td>
<td>11/16/2001</td>
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<td>1/1/2002</td>
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27. A textual analysis of speeches given by other Arab leaders demonstrates to what extent religious sentiment pervades their speeches. President Mubarak cited three verses nine times in eleven public speeches he gave between 1999–2001. His speeches are also substantially longer: 3,000 words on average compared to 750 to 1,000 words. In none of Mubarak’s speeches, moreover, did the verses appear at the beginning or the end, nor were they necessarily followed by religious salutations.
28. On the nonsegregated nature of the (Communist) Committees of Voluntary Action, see Al-Talq, July 17, 1982.
29. On the religious activities of the Shabiba, see for example a write-up on the Shabiba Committee for Social Action in the old city in Al-Bayady al-Siyasi, no. 110 (July 14, 1984): 37. The report recounts how after cleaning the Temple Mount they attended as a group the al-Fajr prayers in the Al-Aqsa Mosque.
35. Fatah, “The Constitution,” http://www.fateh.net/e_public/constitution.htm (accessed 5 March 2004). In the text in Arabic it is called “al-Nizam al-Asasi,” that should be more accurately translated as the Basic Order.
41. The Covenant of the Islamic Resistance Movement, Article 11.
42. Al-Ayyam, December 31, 1995.


49. Ibid.


58. A textual analysis of the third issue of *Al-Nashra al-Markaziyya* (February 15, 2002), the official bulletin of Fatah, which covers approximately fifty pages of text revealed no specific reference to a verse, hadith, or to a specifically Islamic theme. The issues can be found in at http://www.fateh.net/public/newsletter/index.htm.

59. All of the sample of thirty-three announcements issued by the Al-Aqsa Brigades contained at least the Islamic salutation “in the name of Allah the Merciful and the Compassionate” or “Allah is Great” and twenty-two verses from the Koran appeared in them. The eighty-nine Fatah announcements analyzed included no such prelude or salutation and quoted only two verses from the Koran.