

Political Islam & Nationalism

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The fusion of Political Islam and Nationalism is often at the core of Western narratives on Islam as an emerging threat (Budeiri, 1995, 90). This essay traces the fear to Ayatollah Khomeini's Iranian revolution in 1979, via Afghanistan's *mujahideen*, to post-September 11 politics. It draws primarily on Hamas as a case study to analyse the tension between ethnicity, regionalism, and religiously-motivated identity politics. Finally, it closes with some long-term implications of 'Islamism' as a label in political discourse to describe trends in religious nationalism.

A brief survey of counterterrorist literature shows a range of reasons for explicitly linking Political Islam and Nationalism. Walter Laqueur draws on this narrative to update his earlier writings, although he presents the communiqués of Hamas and Islamic Jihad in a fragmented form, and with minimal context or commentary (Laqueur, 2005). Liberal hawk Paul Berman casts Political Islamists as nationalist in order to historicise its exponents as contemporary to German Fascist and Soviet Bolshevik ideologues (Berman, 2005). Michael Scheuer allegorises Osama bin Laden as a revolutionary comparable to the Founding Fathers so that his United States readership can better comprehend Al Qaeda's long-term aims (Anonymous, 2005). For intelligence analyst Graham Fuller, a group like Hamas is best understood as "a national liberation against foreign non-Muslim occupation" (Fuller, 2003, 53). This conclusion appears to be the norm for Western counterterrorist analysts.

The tension between Political Islam and Nationalism is more complex than the above theorists suggest. This failure to understand post-Cold War complexities is best illustrated by Samuel Huntington's attempt to equate Islam's transnational *Ummah* with geopolitical grand strategy in his "clash of civilizations" thesis. Shahram Akbarzadeh observes that, contrary to Huntington's ideal, the Central Asian Muftiyat devolved from a transnational body before the Soviet Union's collapse into five "autonomous national" bodies for the five new Central Asian republics (Akbarzadeh, 2003, 171). The difference in how Political Islam relates the nation and religion means for some analysts that its

trajectory exists outside the Western debate on post-Westphalian international norms. Consequently, this failure in theorymaking has meant that Western analysts misunderstand the rich dynamics at play in Muslim countries.

Contemporary theorists have pursued other avenues in order to understand the dynamics of Political Islam and Nationalism. Meir Litvak has used Clifford Geertz's analysis of religion as constructivist meaning-making to understand Hamas (Litvak, 1998, 148). Anthropologist Henry Munson prefers a rhetoric analysis of Ayatollah Khomeini, Hamas, and Al Qaeda's Osama bin Laden (Munson, 2003, 41). In his discussion of the "Islamic state" model Shahram Akbarzadeh points to the influence of Mawlana Mawdudi's Islamic Society in Pakistan and Bangladesh, and Hassan al-Banna's Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Palestinian regions as pivotal (Akbarzadeh, 2003, 170).

Finally, although this essay focuses primarily on geostrategic, nationalist, and propaganda elements, the debate on theorymaking has increasingly sought other elements for better explanation. Munson suggests other triggers of Political Islamist activists would include macro-economic problems, shifts on societal values on religion, and in-group hostility toward the out-group 'Infidels' (Munson, 2003, 51). Mahmood Mamdani contends that there is a 'level of analysis' distinction between Islamist movements (Mamdani, 2005). He distinguishes between those from above (often by nation-state elites who deploy iconography and symbolism) and those from below (vanguard activists and extremists who seek revolutionary social change). Theorymaking which accounts for these dimensions would help analysts to understand more effectively how Political Islamists have tapped into nationalistic currents, and to overcome earlier groupthink.

Arab Nationalism and Khomeini's Iran

Political Islam's rise is often framed against the decline of Pan Arabism and the Nasserist socialist experiment after the Six Day War in 1967. Arab Nationalism's eclipse now marginalised the Sunni factions in Egypt and Iran who had been dominant throughout the 20th century (Munson, 2003, 41). This created a space for Islamists to differentiate their propaganda from nationalist ideals and socialist rhetoric.

Ayatollah Khomeini's Iranian revolution prioritised the "Islamic state" model for Western analysts. Yet although Khomeini tapped into nationalist currents during 1978-79 this was done to politicise Muslim Arabs and to mobilise them as an Islamist vanguard. Anthropologist Henry Munson believes that despite the nationalist rhetoric Khomeini "would have rejected such a label." (Munson, 2003, 42). Saudi Arabia's Wahhabist regime was another closely studied model, and seemed to confirm that fundamentalist interpretations of *sharia* law could coexist with Westphalian political sovereignty.

These successful regimes were prey to external shifts of Cold War politics and internal conflicts. Ronald Reagan's glamorisation of the Afghan Taliban *mujahideen* on the White House lawn gave way to George Bush's pragmatic alliance-building. Khomeini used this policymaking instability to contrast a reliance on Great Power politics with the regenerative potential of an Islamic Resurgence. This offered a critique of U.S. geostrategic policies and their effects on Second and Third World nation-states.

The Soviet Union's collapse in 1991 triggered domestic crises for many Arab elites (Budeiri, 1995, 91). This prompted some elites to rely on containment policies. Akbarzadeh notes that countries in political transition have tapped into Islam to maintain their political authority (Akbarzadeh, 2003, 169). Yet Islamists have also made pragmatic decisions to ensure their parties survive in authoritarian and inhospitable environments. Algeria's Hamas was able to contest Algeria's 1995 parliamentary elections because its moderate public policies were perceived to be less dangerous than

FIS' *sharia* which triggered the 1992 military coup d'état (Huband, 1999, 65). The tribulations of Palestinian Hamas provide another relevant case study in pragmatic decisions.

Intifada and Ideology

The first Intifada during 1987 was a pivotal event in reshaping Political Islamist identities. Budeiri notes that Hamas members "are street rebels and more nationalist" (Budeiri, 1995, 92-93). Yet the Intifada's traumata catalysed the Hamas activists to consider the religious dimensions of their actions; and they consequently reinterpreted the Al Aqsa mosque and Palestine in trans-historical terms. The first Intifada imbued Hamas as a "spiritual revolution" for its participants rather than a nationalist struggle (Litvak, 1998, 154). Narratives on Osama bin Laden make similar claims about how his experience of the Soviet-Afghanistan war shaped his Islamist identity, and then led to bin Laden's harsh critique of the Saudi Arabian regime during the first Gulf War (Munson, 2003, 47)

Viewed more pragmatically, the Intifada enabled Hamas to outflank the more conspiratorial and militant Islamic Jihad in an inter-group conflict (Budeiri, 1995, 91). The leadership struggle was also necessary to establish Hamas' credentials in order to outflank PLO nationalist revolutionaries (Budeiri, 1995, 95). It established Hamas as the mirror image of extremist Israeli settlers who looked to Judaism for symbolic justification. This out-group tension meant the Intifada reframed the war as between Islam and Judaism, rather than Israel versus Palestinian nationalism (Litvak, 1998, 149). The social judgment and polarisation between these two groups make peace negotiations very difficult.

The Intifada's first consequence was a revival of military jihad for *Shahid* martyrdom. This required the *Ulema*'s reinterpretation of the hadiths to provide a moral justification. Muslim history was also reinterpreted to depict Palestine as a *waqf* protectorate that was central to the Islamic Resurgence (Litvak, 1998, 152). The second consequence was that

Hamas increased its philanthropy and social services work to build a community of support (Munson, 2003, 46). This meant that Hamas became a non-state actor that had taken over many traditional nation-state responsibilities. It also underwrote their mission to expand *dar al-Islam*. However its fusion of nationalist ideals and religious identity continues to be debated.

Hamas' *Charter* and Religious Identity

Hamas' *Charter* (1988) is frequently used to illustrate Political Islam's ideological dimensions. The *Charter's* conspiracy undercurrents, inspired by the anti-Semitic tract *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, depict the Jews as greedy Occidentalists who are responsible for World Wars, financial chaos, and structural violence. These undercurrents highlight a Manichean worldview defined by apocalyptic civilizational conflict between the Jews and Islamists.

The conspiracy undercurrents enable Western counterterrorism experts to portray Hamas as equivalent to the Christian patriot and militia movements. This lens ignores the likelihood that Hamas' ideology was shaped partly by deviation from the Muslim Brotherhood and inter-group competition with Yasser Arafat's Fateh. Other sections of the *Charter* convey that the Islamist rhetoric both denies Israel's sovereignty and exalts Palestinian nationalism (Munson, 2003, 44). The strategic outcome is that the *Charter* provides a meta-historical worldview and functions as propaganda. It is different to Hamas' pragmatic decisions to ensure its political survival (Budeiri, 1995, 95). And it concurs with Mamdani's advice to avoid "culture talk" because, "The clue to the nature of a political movement lie not in it's language but in its agenda." (Mamdani, 2004, 37).

Post-September 11 Implications

The 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States provided a symbolic pretext for Al Qaeda to distinguish Political Islamist societies from *Jahilyyyah*. It led Hamas and Osama bin Laden to focus their propaganda more on Iraq and Palestinian children (Munson, 2003, 50). The 7 July 2005 bombings of London have imperiled Hizb ut-Tarir activists in the United States, Great Britain, and Australia. The post-September 11 'politics of fear' in these countries, together with the emergence of counterterrorist experts as media pundits, presents Hizb ut-Tarir with a very different problem to its survival in Uzbekistan (Akbarzadeh, 2001, 171). The long-term perspective of radical Jihadists and the totalising frame of the 'Global War on Terror' are new barriers to inter-generational conflict resolution (Litvak, 1998, 157).

For Litvak and others, Hamas' use of religious nationalism represents a mutation beyond the Arab Nationalist use of symbols for social integration. The conclusions drawn from this mutation differ if the analyst has a background in cultural studies or political science: the former analyse religious fundamentalism whilst the latter prioritise nationalist explanations. The reality is that these identity politics are more fluid than the discourse categories used to describe them. Hence, analysts will need new models to understand the dynamics of 'religious nationalism'. Equating 'Political Islam' with 'religious nationalism' may reflect more on the analysts' presumptions than the actual dynamics.

Several near-term trends suggest a dystopian future if Political Islamists can exploit nationalist ideals and religious fundamentalism. Political Islamist propaganda has now migrated from fringe publications to the Internet (Parfrey, 2001). Its graffiti and narratives are being analysed hermeneutically to understand the subjective world of *Shahid* suicide bombers (Oliver and Steinberg, 2005). However as critical theorist Ziauddin Sardar observes the political pragmatism shown by Hamas and Hizb ut-Tarir illustrate a deeper understanding of geostrategic transitions which prompt a more optimistic conclusion. Sardar suggests that these groups have already seen the resurgence of nationalist ideals in Chechnya, the new Central Asian republics, and

China's Xinjiang province (Sardar, 2003, 87). Echoing the counter-critique of Jihadists by Olivier Roy and Gilles Keppel, Sardar believes the fusion of 'religious nationalism' signifies a transition that will be surpassed by more democratic change 'from below'.

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