

Conference Paper

Islam versus Secularism in Palestine: Hamas vs. Fatah

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The clash between secularism and Islam in Palestine dates back to the beginning of the Palestinian Israeli conflict more than sixty years ago. Secular political movements and organizations were born from the violent political conflict in the late 1950s and early 1960s of the twentieth century. The establishment of these political movements and organizations was in response to the creation of Israel over historic Palestine and the expulsion of the Palestinians from their homeland. The eruption of the first Palestinian intifada in December 1987 facilitated the spread out of Islamic organizations in Palestine. The signing of the Oslo agreement in September 1993 and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) 1994, created a vacuum in Palestinian resistance against the Israeli occupation which was filled by Islamic movements and organization, mainly Hamas.

Background:

The secular Palestinian groups were more or less part of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) established in May 1964 with the support and sponsorship of the Arab League and President Nasser of Egypt. The main goal of the secular groups was finally adopted in the Palestine National Council of the PLO in its meeting in Algeria in November 1988. The PLO program called for the establishment of a Palestinian state on the 1967 (armistice borders), with East Jerusalem its capital, and a just solution to the refugee problem based on United Nations resolution 194.

The Arab defeat in the 1967 June War marked the beginning of the demise of Arab nationalism and pan-Arabism. The Arab world was shocked by the magnitude of its defeat which marked the beginning of Palestinian nationalism and the proliferation of Palestinian secular movements and groups. Emile Sahliyeh suggests that the political vacuum occurred after the Arab defeat was filled by the "Palestinian national movement, which grew rapidly within and outside the occupied

[Palestinian] territories."¹ In 1974, the Arab countries recognized the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinians inside and outside of Palestine. The Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza acknowledged the PLO's legitimacy and refused to enter into any negotiations with the Israeli government without the backing and support of the PLO. Public opinion polls conducted during the early 1980s in the West Bank showed that 90 percent of the respondents supported the PLO and its leader, Yasser Arafat.²

The PLO was very popular among the Palestinians which made hard for the Islamic groups to compete with it before its expulsion from Lebanon in the summer of 1982. The departure of the PLO and its fighters from Lebanon to Arab countries like Yemen, Sudan, Algeria, and Tunisia, far away from Israel weakened the PLO's military choices. Palestinian secular groups, particularly Fatah, the backbone of the PLO, wasted no opportunity in search of diplomatic alternatives to end the Israeli occupation and establish a Palestinian independent state, but Israel ignored the PLO its diplomatic efforts.

Islam is the Solution:

Arab nationalism first, and then Palestinian nationalism represented by the secular PLO failed to end the Israeli occupation and secure the political rights of the Palestinians. Some of the Palestinians, particularly the younger generation, have sought alternatives to secularism. The alternative to many was the return to Islam. Islam served for the young generation as a "force of ethnic identity, attachment to the land, and cultural purity of the Palestinians."³ Islam was already there, but strong Islamic groups to recruit the youth were absent from the scene during much of the 1970s.

The presence of Islamic groups in the Palestinian territories can be traced back to the beginning of the Palestinian Israeli conflict. However, the intensity and growth of the Islamic groups in Palestine as well as many Arab countries was triggered by the Islamic revolution in Iran 1979. The success of the Iranian revolution was considered an important stimulus, which demonstrated that militants organizing under the banner of Islam could defeat a powerful regime

¹ Emile Sahliyeh, *In Search of Leadership: West Bank Politics Since 1967*, (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institute, p. 139).

² Don Peretz, *The West Bank: History, Politics, Society, and Economy*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1986, pp. 102-103).

³ Sahliyeh, *Op. Cit.*, p. 137.

supported by the United States.⁴ In addition, the successful guerrilla attacks by Hezbollah in southern Lebanon against Israel, which led to its withdrawal, provided an opportunity for the revival of Islam in Palestine.⁵

It is worth noting that the growth of the Islamic groups was also triggered by the rise of the Israeli right (Likud party) to power in 1977. The growth of Jewish extremism and their attacks on the Muslim holy shrines, the policy of land confiscation, and the spread of Jewish settlements drove the Palestinians to Islam.⁶ Therefore, Islam for many Palestinians became the source of hope and salvation from the Israeli occupation. The banner "Islam is the solution" has become very popular in Palestine as well as many countries in the Arab world.

The outbreak of the Palestinian first intifada in December 1987, gave renewed prominence to the Islamic groups. When the intifada erupted, the PLO's popularity was declining in the Palestinian territories. The PLO and secularism failed to bring an end to the Israeli occupation and secure the political rights of the Palestinians. The eruption of the intifada was a golden opportunity for the Islamic groups to seize it and present itself to the Palestinians as an alternative to the PLO and secularism. The clash between secularism and Islam in Palestine which took the form of competition and low level clashes between secular and Islamic college students during the early and mid 1980s, escalated into violent clashes during the intifada. Hamas from the beginning refused to join the secular groups in leading the daily activities of the intifada and forced its agenda and activities by force on the Palestinian street.⁷

The Impact of the Oslo Agreement on Secular-Islamist Relations:

The clash between secularism and Islam was highly escalated after the signing of the Oslo agreement in September 1993 between the PLO and Israel and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in 1994. Hamas's opposition to the Oslo agreement stems from the fact that it sees autonomy as more dangerous than the occupation; it is a reorganization of the

⁴ Mark Tessler, *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994, p. 692).

⁵ Sahilyeh, *Op. Cit.*, p. 140.

⁶ Robert Friedman, *Zealots for Zion, Inside Israel's West Bank Settlement Movement*, (New York: Random House, 1992, pp. 3-28).

⁷ The author is an eyewitness to that period as a student at Birzeit University in the early 1980s, and living in the Gaza Strip during the first two years of the first intifada.

occupation in a way that is more comfortable to the Israelis.⁸ Some Palestinians even described the Palestinian Authority as subcontractor of the Israeli occupation to deliver security to Israel and municipal services to the Palestinians. The Oslo agreement does not give the Palestinians the right to establish an independent sovereign Palestinian state. The agreement also fell short of full recognition of the political rights of the Palestinians. Moreover, Israel has not abandoned its territorial claims to the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

Hamas rejected the Oslo agreement and all agreement between the PLO and Israel and vowed from the beginning to fight against it. Hamas decided to sabotage the Oslo agreement and the PA through suicide bombings against Israel 1994-1996. Hamas launched a wave of suicide bombing in late February and early March 1996 to avenge the assassination of its bomb maker, the engineer, Yehya Ayyash, who was assassinated by Israel in January 1996. The PA President, Yasser Arafat, concluded that the stability of the PA was under a real threat, and under intense Israeli and international pressure, the PA's security apparatuses went after Hamas and its military wing Izz-eddin al-Qassam Brigades. Hundred of Hamas political and military affiliates were rounded up and persecuted in PA prisons. That created a wound in Palestinian internal relation that never went away. Hamas current persecution of pro Fatah in Gaza is considered a revenge of the past. The clash between Islam and secularism was on its zenith, incitement and hate between Islamists and secularist was on the rise.

The failure of the peace negotiation between the PLO and Israel after the Camp David summit in July 2000 proved that the Palestinians and Israelis were not capable of bridging their differences on the core issues: the fate of Palestinian refugees, Jerusalem, final borders, and security arrangements along the Jordanian border. The collapse of the peace negotiations paved the way to the second Palestinian intifada, Alaqsa intifada in September 2000 after Sharon's visit to Haram Al-Sharif.

Hamas was very hesitant to participate in the intifada activities during the first six months. But when it became evident later that the gaps between the Palestinian and Israelis were not bridgeable, and Yasser Arafat decided to change the rules of the game, and the intifada could not be stopped, Hamas then calculated its cards shrewdly and took its strategic decision to participate, but in a very violent way, suicide bombings, infiltrating Israeli settlements, and

⁸ Keith Klein and Adila Laidi, Pre-Election Technical Assessment: West Bank & Gaza, (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 1994).

missile attacks on Israeli towns and villages adjacent to Gaza. By the time, Israel decided to disengage from the Gaza Strip; Hamas has become one of the main players in the Palestinian Israeli conflict. The death of Yasser Arafat in November 2004, and the Israeli disengagement from Gaza in the summer 2005, set the stage for Palestinian presidential elections in January 2005, and legislative elections in January 2006.

The Hamas Earthquake:

Hamas swept the Palestinian legislative elections by capturing 74 seats out 132, as well as dominating local election during 1995. Hamas was able to win the hearts and minds of the Palestinian by stressing the slogan (change and reform). Fatah was hunted by its record of corruption and mismanagement and the collapse of the peace process. Hamas was also able to take advantage of its high military record during the intifada and attributed the Israeli disengagement from Gaza, as a victory to resistance and not to negotiations. Israel refused to negotiate or even coordinate its disengagement from Gaza with the PA.

With a Hamas-run Palestinian new government headed by Mr. Ismail Haniyeh, a hostile external and internal atmosphere is the dominant. While the vast majority of public employees were affiliated with both Fatah movement and the PA, the new government has started facing sanctions from the international community. Apparently, this was on the pretext of the Hamas refusal to recognize Israel, to abide by past agreements, and to renounce violence. While the West boycotted the Hamas led government and withheld aid to it, the U.S. government intensified its efforts to recruit other parties to tie all their future assistance to PA, and to freeze the international bank transactions with Gaza banks.⁹

Hamas leaders called the conditions sought unfair and would endanger the well-being of all Palestinians. A new stage in the clash between secularism and Islam started with Hamas's June 2007 military takeover of Gaza. Elements within the PA and Fatah started joining the U.S., Israel, and several Arab states in adopting a strategy of weakening Hamas government through isolating Gaza.¹⁰ Hamas incitement against Fatah reached its zenith. It accused the PA's government in Ramallah as a puppet government run by U.S. General Keith Dayton and waged

⁹ "U.S. Foreign Aid to the Palestinians", Jeremy M. Sharp and Christopher M. Blanchard, CRS Report for Congress, June 2006.

¹⁰ "Hamas and Fatah at the Crossroads", Mkhaimar Abusada, project-syndicate, Retrieved 15 December 2009 from www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/abusada5

a media war on the PA's government and President Mahmoud Abass. Four years after Hamas swept Palestinian legislative elections, and three years after it seized control of the Gaza Strip, Michael Herzog asserts that "Hamas has neither moderated its policies nor adopted democratic principles. It is torn between its ideology as an Islamist jihadi movement and its responsibilities as a governing authority in Gaza. Hamas has proven unwilling to transform itself."¹¹ Hamas as most of political Islam movements has been aiming at achieving a gradual Islamization of the Palestinian society based on Islamic religious law "the Shari'ah". The unique social and political features of Gaza Strip have been providing an optimum atmosphere for such aim. Should this happen, Hamas would implement and promote its Shari'ah-based political and cultural philosophies. Hamas initiated a gradual yet determined process of Islamization of the Gaza society, by controlling the courts, the media, and the education system.

In a consistent show of power in Gaza Strip in the few past years, and partially in reaction to the strike of veterans' teachers, the Hamas de facto government had tightened its grip on the education system. The move included replacing several hundreds of Fatah affiliated teachers, school principals, and educational supervisors with Hamas-supporting individuals, and leaning to force school girls to wear Islamic clothes (Hijab). Obviously, these procedures together with promoting only the staff affiliated with Hamas, feminizing the schools of girls, and commemorating the assassination of the movement's leaders inside the schools can be seen as manifestations of Islamization of the education system.¹²

The Future of Palestinian Politics:

The current split between the PA and Hamas will not be resolved in the foreseeable future, and a national unity government reunifying the West Bank and Gaza is not within sight. The Egyptian initiative which was signed by Fatah and rejected so far by Hamas stipulates for the establishment of a Palestinian factional committee to coordinate between the two governments in Ramallah and Gaza. Hamas has created new facts in the Gaza Strip which makes it impossible to return back to the pre Hamas takeover of Gaza. In this regard, Ehud Ya'ari predicts that the future of Palestinian politics will more or less resemble Kurdish Politics in Iraq. He says:

¹¹ Michael Herzog, The Hamas Conundrum, Foreign Affairs, www.foreignaffairs.com/article/65952/michael-herzog/the-hamas-conundrum

¹² Mkhaimar Abusada and Fakhr Abu-Awwad, the Rule of Hamas in Gaza: Forthcoming.

"Palestinian politics will likely be characterized by a Kurdish-style situation: two rival factions will retain control of their respective districts even if they finally manage to establish some semblance of a joint authority. A Palestinian state divided between the PA and Hamas would likely operate in the same manner as Iraqi Kurdistan, where the Kurdish Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan control their respective provinces in northern Iraq under the nominal jurisdiction of the Kurdish Regional Government-the equivalent of a PA-led national unity government."¹³

¹³ Ehud Ya'ari, *Armistice Now: An interim Agreement for Israel and Palestine*, Forthcoming, Foreign Affairs.