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THE CHALLENGE OF ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM

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Western Misconception of Realities

On a visit to Italy to attend the funeral of an Italian dignitary, PLO leader Yasser Arafat had no trouble meeting with the Italian Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister and other high level dignitaries. While such meetings are so commonplace that they are hardly noted in the world press, they make headline news in the East Jerusalem newspapers. This propaganda is part of an incessant campaign to bolster Arafat's standing and give meaning to the PLO; an organization split three ways, neglected by the Arab states, and challenged by a growing Islamic fundamentalist movement that denies it any political, ideological, or moral legitimacy.

It raises the question as to why these dignitaries meet with Arafat. Is it because Arafat wields any political cards in the Arab world? Surely Italian intelligence knows that

Arafat cannot pressure King Hussein of Jordan into freeing PLO prisoners in Amman, let alone influence high level affairs in the Arab states. Could it be because of oil connections? This hardly seems possible since Italy's primary provider from the Arab world is Libya, Arafat's main antagonist. Is it out of compassion? It is rather unreasonable to think that the Italian leadership, who have suffered so much from terrorism, should have compassion for those who introduced it on the European scene.

The answer lies on a deeper level involving a serious misconception of the meaning of nationalism in the Middle East and a lack of understanding of the tension and conflict between *quamiyya* (Arab nationalism) and *wataniyya* (state nationalism).

The Western dignitaries view the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinian

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people, and in turn as a national movement. When these dignitaries meet Yasser Arafat, they no doubt believe that they are meeting a national leader who commands the most powerful political emotions amongst his constituency; a man like themselves. They can hardly conceive that the most powerful political and social emotions possessed by most Arabs have nothing to do with national leaders and national movements. If anything these concepts are considered highly suspect by the Arabs.

In the West, social movements - religious and ideological - tend to reinforce nationalist sentiment toward the state and only rarely to undermine it. Even Communism, a revolutionary, supranational doctrine became Russian Communism in the Soviet Union and Eurocommunism in Europe. The same can be said of the generational surges of Christian fundamentalism in the United States. No one would conceive of equating the upsurge of religious awakening with a decline in state nationalism. The opposite would probably hold true.

By contrast, ideological movements in the Middle East are vehemently anti-nationalist. In the West, nationalism is largely unchallenged; while in the Middle East, only ruthless dictators have managed to keep the nation-states intact in the face of powerful anti-state ideological and religious forces. In the Middle East, state nationalism is always on the defensive; in the Western nations it is taken for granted.

From Pan-Arabism to Pan-Islam

The Palestinians are fully aware of the weakness and conditional illegitimacy of state nationalism in the Middle East. Jordan, for example, does not celebrate the day it received its independence, but the anniversary of the Arab Revolt of 1917 which, in the Arab view, liberated all Arabs from the Turks. Iraq is not fighting Iran in self defense, but rather to maintain Arab presence in the Persian Gulf. As Ba'athist, socialist pan-Arab regimes, both Syria and Iraq cultivate supranationalist ideologies as does Muammar Qaddafi in Libya. In fact, the only regime that is nationalist in the European sense is Egypt, and that is only a recent development. The political behavior of the Palestinians also reflects this reality. In the 1950s, most of the Palestinian leaders flocked to the pan-Arab movements, whose fervor and attraction threatened a number of Arab states. In the early

1960s, many were adherents of Arab socialism, another movement that had little respect for state sovereignty, the integrity of the state system nor state nationalist movements. In the 1970s, the Palestinians, through tortuous debates, finally overcame the problems of defining their movement in relation to Arab nationalism and state nationalism, elevating the latter to a status of semi-dignity. Soon after this was achieved, it was challenged by the most powerful and most rooted anti-state movement of them all -- pan-Islamic fundamentalism.

This incomprehension of the weakness of state nationalism in the Arab world may explain why, in the hallways of the European Community and the Western capitals, the Palestine Liberation Organization is regarded as the sole representative organ of the Palestinian people, while in the hallways of Al-Najah University in Nablus, Hebron University, and the Islamic University in Gaza this position is sharply contended. What is taken for granted by the international community is simply untrue for the young intelligentsia of the territories today. While the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East presents a serious challenge to all Arab states, this threat looms especially large against a stateless movement, like the PLO, which adopted a particularistic nationalist approach as declared in the 1974 draft of its covenant.

Islamic Fundamentalism in the Palestinian Universities

Palestinian nationalists in the territories are faced with a dilemma. Just when they finally succeeded in creating strong socializing institutions in the form of six universities throughout the territories, the latter were hit by a storm of Islamic fundamentalism. The inspiration for this new fervor has come from Shiite Iran. The establishment of the first Islamic bloc on a campus occurred in Al-Najah University, the West Bank's largest with a student enrollment of 3500, and coincided with the Khomeini revolution. Its ideology was supplied by the nearby Muslim Brotherhood--a movement developed in Egypt, Syria, and Jordan which ebbed in the late 1950s, but never died. Hebron University, established by Muhammad Sheik Al-Jabri with the active help of the Israeli military government, was next in line. As a sharia college specializing in Islamic law and letters, the Islamic bloc from the outset presented a formidable challenge to the nationalist camp (the pro-Fateh Harakat-a-Shabiba).

In the Islamic University in Gaza, founded in 1979, the nationalists never had a chance. Gaza, whose population is ninety-nine percent Muslim, had been exposed, since the mid-seventies, to the powerful currents of Islamic fundamentalism emanating from Egypt. Today, nationalist students attend that institution at their own risk.

In the next three years, Islamic blocs were established in at least ten other institutions of higher learning; in six they controlled the student bodies.

However, Islamic fundamentalism has not been so popular in the territories outside of the universities. There is no parallel to Iran, nor even to the return to faith movement in Egyptian universities. Perhaps as a result, Islamic fundamentalists lost ground after 1983. In the 1983-84 academic year, the Shabiba movement, the largest nationalist bloc, won most of the student councils elections. What seems to be occurring here is something worse than the beginnings of a pitched battle; it is an Islamic kulturkampf pivoting the nationalist and Marxist forces against the Islamic fundamentalists.

The Islamic Block Breaks with Arafat

The struggle is on two levels. Ideologically, there has been a noticeable hardening of positions vis-a-vis the PLO among members of the Islamic bloc. Until the Tripoli evacuation of the PLO from Lebanon in December 1983, most of the Islamic bloc took a benign view of Arafat. Tactically, they were willing to accept the necessity of waging a national struggle. Arafat's early links with the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1950s as a university student in Cairo; his well publicized fulfillment of prayer obligations; and his alliance with radical Muslim groups against Syrian and Lebanese leftists before and during the siege of Tripoli, made him acceptable to all except the hardcore Ansar of Muslim student fundamentalism in the territories.

The break occurred when Arafat, on his way to Tunisia in 1983, made a surprise stop in Egypt to meet President Husni Mubarak - a personality whose infamy in fundamentalist Muslim circles is exceeded only by that of President Hafez el Assad of Syria. The latter is known for his massacre of 5,000 Palestinians in Tel-A-Za'atar and the slaughter of 40,000 Muslims in an uprising in the Syrian city of Hama, and Mubarak is branded a devious landseller. As an anonymous article that appeared in a Hebron

University Islamic bloc publication, entitled "Between Tel-A-Za'atar and Camp David" proclaimed, "Concerning the split in the PLO, we find that the faction that headed to Damascus can not offer us anything...and that the faction which headed to Cairo will not offer us anything...we can only repeat what we have said, that Islam alone is able to achieve our rights...without Islam we will continue treading winding roads leading us to defeat and catastrophe, slaughter upon slaughter. Islam is the righteous sword, without it is a sword of wood and paper." That sword, formerly wielded against only the Communists and the neo-Marxist supporters of George Habash's Popular Front and Naif Hawatmeh's Democratic Front (the radical factions within the PLO), will henceforth be wielded against the mainstream Al-Fateh group. The latter will no doubt retaliate accordingly.

There are also political organizational factors undermining nationalist efforts. One is the growing Muslim current among university and college faculty. As recently as two years ago, the PLO had a virtual monopoly among the university teachers. Today fundamentalist faculty are active in all the universities except Bethlehem, a Catholic university with a pronounced radical leftist student body. In Birzeit and Al-Najah most of the fundamentalists teachers are concentrated in the two engineering schools and in the science faculties - a phenomenon that has its parallels in other Arab countries.

Another factor is that most of the notables on the Boards of Governors of the universities are more religious than nationalist. As pro-Jordanians they never favored PLO attempts to transform local universities into politically mobilizing institutions. In fact, many nationalists believe that these governors became involved in academic affairs only to disrupt this process. For example, in Al-Najah, the nationalists have demanded for years that the university administration follow the letter of the law and exercise a strong hand against fundamentalist violence. In a recent incident, a fundamentalist mob attacked the organizers of a Communist bookfair on campus honoring the second anniversary of the newly formed Palestinian Communist Party. The faculty went so far as to strike and keep the school closed until their demands to stop the violence were met. They were not. This precedent set by the Islamic University invites further pressure on nationalists in the other colleges as well.

Can the Nationalists Weather the Fundamentalist Wave?

Nationalists are frustrated that they will not be able to capitalize on recent Shabiba victories in the student elections in order to bolster the nationalist image of the local universities. The deep split within nationalist ranks, between the Shabiba movement and the student groups affiliated with the Aden group (the Democratic Alliance that demanded the ouster of Arafat from the PLO as a condition for restoring unity within the PLO), has presented a golden opportunity to the weakened Islamic fundamentalist camp. If once the Islamic fundamentalists were outnumbered two to one in Birzeit and Al-Najah Universities, on a one to one basis, they do not rank far behind the Shabiba movement in terms of the amount of students they can mobilize, and they certainly dwarf the leftists.

The Islamic bloc knows from past experience how miserable their chances are against a united opposition. In 1979, the Al-Najah Islamic bloc routed the nationalist opposition which had split three ways. The following year, the pro-Fateh group joined forces with the pro-Habash and Hawatmeh factions to win seven of the twelve seats. The split allows them to play off the two sides. In the incident at Al-Najah, Shabiba students stood idly by while the leftists took a beating from the fundamentalists; conversely the leftists watched passively as the two main exhibits in Birzeit Palestinian week were burned to the ground. At first, the Shabiba faction accused the leftists who had, for the first time, boycotted the event. It was only after the Jabat'I-Aml A-Tulabia, the pro-Habash faction and the most stridently anti-Arafat faction on campus, publically disclaimed any wrongdoing that accusing fingers were pointed at the right.

In any event, whatever the fundamentalists lack in numbers, they more than compensate for in zealous extremism. The nationalist groups, especially the pro-Fateh mainstream, are reluctant to use force. They are fearful that violence will be used as a pretext by the Israelis to close down the universities. The institutions of higher learning remain, after all, the vanguard institutions of the Palestinian movement. The nationalists prefer to wait and weather the Islamic wave until it ebbs, as it did in the early fifties.

The Islamic fundamentalists have no such

reservations. Their power base is the mosque on campus. If that were to be closed down, they would move to another one. They show no willingness to stick to the democratic rules of the game; they reject democracy out of hand and are under no ideological obligation to respect their adversaries. The opening remarks of one of their publications illustrates this clearly. In a style to which no translation can do justice, it states:

"Our Islam is as clear as the sun...For that reason, the act of distinguishing between what is Islamic and what is not Islamic is easy, clear....He who adopts secular thought can not possibly be the bearer of Islamic ideas...because secularism is a dangerous contradiction to Islam. The same can be said for anyone adopting Ba'athism and nationalism.. ..Love of country stems from Islam alone....Anything stemming from what is not Islam is only a temporary opportunistic interest.... One can not regard their love of country as being pure; it must indeed be tied to some interest or other.

But Islam is heavenly and lofty. He who wants to bear its yoke must pay for it in blood, in time, in toil, and in effort. The Islamic camp the world over has met this obligation from the beginning. Therefore, whoever wants to hearken to Islam must bear the Islamic idea completely. Islam represents principles and a way of life ...To those who are trying to steal Islam away, Islam is not to be stolen."

The charge of thievery is clearly leveled against Palestinian nationalists for whom Islam is a part of their historical legacy. It is an accusation to which they cannot respond. After all, how can the universal and whole become a part of something else? Instead of entering into futile dialogue with the Islamic fundamentalists, they feel it is better to dig in and outlast the fundamentalist wave. There lies a serious danger with this kind of thinking. Even if pan-Islamic fundamentalism dies, another anti-state ideology might soon appear to deny them the legitimacy and the power they seek.

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