

# SURVEY OF ARAB AFFAIRS

A periodic supplement to Jerusalem Letter/Viewpoints

SAA:39 29 Tevet 5755 / 1 January 1995

## ISRAEL IN A CHANGING WORLD

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### A Shift in Arab Opinion

Israel's relationship with the world has undergone a tremendous change since the Oslo agreement, especially its relationships with Arab countries. To take my personal experience, I have attended a number of professional meetings in Washington, D.C., where Arab diplomats, including ambassadors, have come over to shake my hand, something that would never have happened before. I have even had a Saudi diplomat, who sat at my side in a seminar of experts, tell me how he appreciated my latest books, and later had sent me most favorable reviews of them published in the Arab press.

We who follow the Arab press definitely see a major change on the ground in the Arab world. Even in Syria, which strongly objects to reaching a quick settlement with Israel, public opinion is already accepting an eventual peace with Israel ahead of its leadership.

What Israel has gained through the peace process is tremendously valuable. We have gained

the sympathy and support of the whole world, most of which had disliked us because of endemic anti-Semitism or a concern for human rights. Today, it seems, Israel is on the side of the angels.

### The Myth of Arab Unity

As we look at the changes in the Arab world, there are three very important developments that should be reviewed. The first has to do with the myth of Arab unity. Pan-Arabism had been waning rapidly even in the lifetime of President Gamal Abdel Nasser, and when he died in 1970 it remained little more than a symbol.

Professor Fuad Ajami, a Shi'ite Muslim who immigrated to the U.S. at an early age from Lebanon, wrote a superb book in the early 1980s entitled *The Arab Predicament*, in which he describes how ever since Nasser's death, the myth of Arab unity has been kept alive somewhat artificially as a working formula for the disintegrating Arab social order. During the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), some Arab countries were openly on the

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side of the Iranians, who are non-Arabs and have been historically considered the enemies of the Arabs. Other Arab countries maintained a neutral position during the war, and only the conservative ones, ironically, stood behind Iraq. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait also demonstrated that Arab unity was a myth.

Any semblance of Arab cooperation that had existed in the past has vanished in the face of the change in the world's bi-polar system to one of a single superpower. Thus, Iraq's attempt to replay the role of Egypt, and Saddam Hussein's wish to be the new Nasser, were doomed to failure. Indeed, the outcome of the Gulf War made possible the American presence in the Gulf and the peace process with Israel. Jordan would not have dared sign a separate peace treaty with Israel, nor would several other Arab countries have established some relations with it, before the Kuwait invasion.

The disintegration of the Arab system has been going on for some time. Before the war with Kuwait, the Arab world was polarized into various alliances. One was the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the Arab countries who have the money and the oil. Another was the Arab Cooperation Council (ACC), which included Iraq, Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen, largely the have-nots. The third was the Maghreb Cooperation Council (MCC), to which Libya associated itself. Yet none of these organizations were vibrant and dominant. The most important goal of the wealthy Gulf Cooperation Council was to preserve their wealth for themselves and to protect themselves against the others and outside subversion.

### Growing Poverty in the Arab World

A second important development is the growing poverty within the Arab world. It is necessary to understand this process in order to anticipate the kind of peace that is likely to exist in the Middle East in the future.

As Professor Eliyahu Kanovsky of Bar-Ilan University has well documented, even the rich Arab oil countries are practically bankrupt, at least temporarily. They can no longer finance their extensive welfare systems that help maintain their governments in power. It was indeed only by buying their own people — lock, stock, and barrel — that they had succeeded in maintaining stability in their countries.

There is currently a tacit understanding between the United States and the Arab oil countries that in the changed world order they will enjoy a protective American umbrella in the area, in return for which these countries will undertake to maintain the continu-

ous flow of reasonably priced oil to the Western world. Indeed, this cheap energy has been the major factor in the recent economic revival of the industrial countries.

With the financial problems of the Arab oil states, the Palestinians may expect to be only marginally supported by their brethren, who in any case have no great love for them and indeed fear them.

### Fundamentalism and Neo-Fundamentalism

The growing poverty in the Arab world is a major cause of the third major development — the rise of militant fundamentalism. The Hamas movement is an offshoot of militant fundamentalism which has become a common phenomenon in all of the Muslim world (not just the Arab world).

The wave of "modern" Islamic fundamentalism emerged nearly 100 years ago as the Muslim-Arab world faced the bitter reality that the despised infidel Western Christian world had not only overtaken the Muslims in every field, but had eventually colonized them as well; that the Muslim empire was no longer in the forefront of the civilized world, but rather backward in every field and belonged to the "Third World."

Fundamentalism had its roots in the multi-faceted search for answers to problems posed by the Western world, with its power, technology, and culture impinging on the world of Islam. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Jamal al-Din-al-Afghani, considered by many the father of modern fundamentalism, believed that Western culture and philosophy could be separated from technology. The former he strongly rejected and the latter he accepted, claiming that the West had actually borrowed it from the Muslims and further developed it. His people, he preached, should take back that which was rightfully theirs in order, inter alia, to fight Western colonialism and power.

The message has undergone certain changes over the years, but the crucial principle of rejecting Western values, culture, and hegemony remains the key to Islamic views to this day. What has changed, however, are the tactics. In the circumstances of a future without hope, Islamic fundamentalists teach that the real answer for all of society's ills and people's personal problems lies in a return to the roots — the original teachings and way of life of the prophet Mohammad and his followers, and the success they achieved in the first centuries when Muslim society was one of equals; the Muslim *umma* and its leaders looked after all the believers, closely followed the principles laid out in the Koran, and was led by pious, righteous rulers.

The old school of twentieth century fundamentalism, such as the pre-World War II Muslim Brotherhood, sought to recreate such a social order, but did not seek at first to replace the Egyptian and other existing governments. After World War II, however, the Muslim Brotherhood resorted increasingly to militancy and terrorism, not only to achieve their aims but to gain political power.

After 1952 this militancy led to an increasingly sharp confrontation between fundamentalists and the successful secular nationalist pan-Arab movement championed by Nasser. After an abortive assassination attempt by the Brotherhood in 1954 and especially in the late 1950s, Nasser's jails were crammed with Muslim Brethren, some of whom radically changed their approach to the secular state and its rulers. They no longer believed that any secular government could transform itself into a Muslim one. They considered government and society so corrupt that they had to be destroyed in order to be rebuilt from the bottom up according to the principles of a true Islamic state.

In their quest for total change, the militant neo-fundamentalists turned to *Jihad* — holy war — against their own corrupt "secular" regimes. They compared them to the pre-Islamic idolatrous societies (*Jahiliyya*) and rejected the secular Arab state, along with Western culture, its materialism and its foundations, which failed to provide a solution for the people's suffering and the decline of the Muslim countries.

One of their leading modern ideologists, Sayyid Qutb, who lived for some years in the U.S., returned to Egypt around 1950, altogether disgusted with Western culture, its "corrupt" principles and materialism. Qutb held the local Arab governments, particularly Egypt's, responsible for allowing their societies to permit Western "corruption," enabling Westernization to replace true Islamic ideals, and for introducing Western materialism and other ills into Muslim society. He was convinced that such regimes, especially the Nasserite states, could not solve the Arab societies' social and economic problems.

Like many other Muslim Brethren who opposed Nasser's regime, Qutb was incarcerated in 1954, released briefly in 1964, and was executed after an abortive fundamentalist coup in 1966. Yet his books and letters from jail, in wide circulation to this day, had a tremendous impact on some of the Muslim Brothers' changing outlook and the emergence of new militant groups. The new generation of militant fundamentalists want to totally change the socio-political system to a theocracy governed or supervised by truly Islamic

scholars. Militant Islamic fundamentalism aims at overthrowing Arab and Muslim regimes as a whole, in order to install truly Islamic ones in their place.

Sayyid Qutb and his followers believed that popular Islam as it is commonly practiced had totally corrupted true Islam, as practiced until the ninth century, and is to be considered worse than the teachings of the infidels. In order to achieve their goals, Qutb's followers felt that they had to remove themselves from the corrupt societies within which they lived (*Hijra*), patterned after the prophet Mohammad's move from Mecca to Medina, to create a new circle of true believers who will fight the existing society and government, and solve the challenges that the Muslim world faces.

The radical thoughts expressed in this approach find a receptive audience even among the intelligentsia, not to mention the poor masses, throughout much of the frustrated Muslim world. In contemporary Egypt, for example, poverty cohabits with extreme wealth, while the overall standard of living constantly declines. Unchecked population growth limits the number of people who can subsist on agriculture, thereby increasing the number of hopeless Egyptians migrating to the cities, which for decades have not had the infrastructure to accommodate them.

Only a few million Arabs actually enjoy the great wealth generated by oil revenues. The Muslim have-nots number about eight hundred million, including over a hundred million Arabs. Their standard of living deteriorates continuously because of high birthrates that annually overtake the rate of economic growth and the jobs it provides.

#### **Iran: Pragmatic But Still Fundamentalist**

In non-Arab Iran, which underwent a fundamentalist revolution under the Ayatollah Khomeini, the lot of the average Iranian farmer did improve temporarily and although it again declined, it is still better than in the days of the Shah. However, Iran's population has risen by over 80 percent since 1979 and millions have migrated to Iran's towns, mistakenly hoping to find jobs and housing. Yet poverty and misery among the urban proletariat is worse than ever.

Iran, with its oil and partly diversified economy, has the potential of eventually becoming a well-to-do society if it was to direct its efforts toward economic development and invest its oil revenues to invigorate its economy. However, Iran's economy is badly managed and its clergy-directed government earmarks a large percentage of its income to build up its military might and export its revolutionary ideology to all the

Muslim world, supporting nearly every militant fundamentalist organization, with particular efforts directed against Israel. Shi'ite Iran sees itself as the vanguard of true Islam in the Muslim world, with its first target being the Arab world. Iran has become the supporter of all fundamentalist regimes (Sudan) and revolutionary movements from Morocco to Afghanistan, including the Hizbollah in Lebanon, the Hamas and Islamic Jihad movements in the territories, and the Israeli Arab fundamentalists.

Iranian President Rafsanjani has hinted to the Egyptian leadership that he will continue to help undermine their regime as long as it supports the conservative Arab regimes and collaborates with America and its efforts to advance the Arab-Israeli peace process. Iran aims at destabilizing all the secular Sunni Muslim-Arab regimes, either directly or indirectly through agents such as Sudan's Sunni-fundamentalist regime and militant fundamentalist movements.

Although many analysts in the West tend to differentiate between the two main political streams in Iran, the "pragmatists" and the "extremists," in the final analysis both are extreme fundamentalist. President Rafsanjani, the "pragmatist," is no less a fanatic than his opponents, led by Imam Khamenahi. Rafsanjani is ready to bow to circumstances and use Western technology, education up to a certain point, and, above all, investment in his country, in order to advance its military capability and achieve hegemony in the region, and improve Iran's economy with the purpose of raising the standard of living of the population, and fulfill the unachievable goals of the Islamic revolution.

Yet this pragmatism coexists alongside the traditional trappings of a Shi'ite regime, including a propaganda and indoctrination office called Da'wa, which is also responsible for all the shady operations of spreading the word of God through terrorism and subversion (led by Ayatollah Muntazeri, who once was considered Khomeini's spiritual heir).

Rafsanjani's regime is supportive of a major effort to "Islamicize" Muslim regimes, subverting the weakest Arab governments first by financially assisting local fundamentalist groups, training terrorists, and supplying weapons. The big mistake commonly made by many Western scholars, who believe that Rafsanjani is coerced to support the "extremists" in Iran's government, is to think that Rafsanjani the "pragmatist" will adjust himself to *realpolitik* and the new world order.

### Afghanistan: The Graduate School of Fundamentalism

The graduate school for Arab-Muslim fundamentalism was the Afghanistan *Jihad*, the anti-Soviet rebels and *mujahidin* who, ironically, were financed by Saudi Arabia and armed by the CIA. The Turkish Army, for example, has a major problem with their ex-Afghani *mujahidin*, those Turks who went to Afghanistan to fight against the Russians there. They are the hard core, not the very mild Islamic party that swept the municipal elections in Turkey. This was recently demonstrated in the trial of scores involved in fundamentalist terrorist activities in Istanbul, Ankara and elsewhere in Turkey.

The only country that was clever enough and decisive in dealing with its own *mujahidin* was Jordan. They had lists of all Jordanians who volunteered to fight in the *Jihad* in Afghanistan. After the first bombs exploded in some of Jordan's movie theaters, clubs, and restaurants about twelve months ago, the authorities rounded up every suspected ex-*mujahid*, cross-examined them using their own methods, and brought to trial and incarcerated the hard core of about 70-80 people (with some facing death sentences). Since then, there has been no serious problem with militants in Jordan, at least for the time being.

But when we look at Egypt and Algeria, or Sudan where fundamentalists control the government, matters look very different. One has a major problem in dealing with the challenge of a body that is not willing to accept the modern world and its new system of world order, and are ready to fight everything Western, including their intelligentsia. The fundamentalists still believe in the final victory of the holy war of Islam and the achievement of success through power and assassination. The word "assassin," by the way, comes from the term *hashashiyun*, who in the Middle Ages managed to control much of the Middle East through assassination of the rulers after feasting their martyrs (*Shuhada*; sing. *Shahid*) with hashish, until they met with the Crusaders who did not understand or did not tolerate these people and simply wiped them out in their fortresses in the Middle East (except for Iran).

Yet not much has changed in fundamentalist thinking when it comes to following the literal commands of the prophet and the differentiation between believers and non-believers. Anybody who is a non-believer and claims political rights and especially an independent

identity within the Muslim Arab world cannot be tolerated.

Ironically, even ancient communities such as Egypt's Copts, the Maronites in Lebanon, and the Assyrians and Chaldeans in Iraq and Syria have come to the conclusion that they cannot exist in such a world of growing Islamic fundamentalism. The Copts are the remnants of the true Egyptians and in today's Egypt, the most secular state in the Arab world aside from the Christian parts of Lebanon, Copts and Muslims theoretically enjoy equal rights. Nonetheless, the number of Copts in the country steadily declines, due to constant emigration caused by widespread discrimination in the state and increasing persecution and pogroms carried out by Muslim fanatics. The Muslim masses in Egypt and elsewhere simply refuse to accept *dhimmi* (tolerated monotheistic) minority communities as being equal. Today, in addition to the Egyptian Coptic community of about seven million, an estimated 40 percent of Egyptian Copts live out of the country. An estimated million and a half live in the United States and have their own institutions and publications. The Lebanese Christians, too, largely the Maronites, are dispersed all over the world because they have given up and emigrated from their country.

Yet we Jews have nowhere else to go. This is our ancient and historic land, where we are and where we will remain. So here it may even become a question of us or them. The question for us is how we are going to overcome the aspirations of the fundamentalists and Palestinians in general. It is going to be very difficult.

#### **If Hamas Takes Over a PLO State**

The threat of Arab fundamentalism and its power holds serious consequences for Israel. It appears that the involvement of the PLO in negotiations with the Israeli government will eventually lead to the establishment of a Palestinian state in practically all the territories beyond the pre-1967 "green line." Yet if this happens, the possibility of an eventual fundamentalist takeover is not unlikely. Even if for tactical purposes the Hamas does not obstruct the gradual consolidation of the PLO Palestinian state, the fundamentalists' power, local clashes with Israel, and economic hardship are likely to help unleash a second stage in which the Hamas will be able to push aside the PLO and take over the Palestinian entity or state.

The power of the fundamentalists, who reject any arrangement with a "Jewish-Zionist entity," has spread from the Gaza Strip to the West Bank and it has brought newfound vigor to the battle against Israel.

Sheikh Yassin, the founder of the Hamas movement, said in a televised interview a few years ago (when not in an Israeli jail) that what Israelis can expect from a potentially fundamentalist Palestinian state is that once it has destroyed the Jewish political entity, the Jews can remain in Palestine as *dhimmi* — tolerated people. According to Islamic law, the people of the book can live (theoretically, as history demonstrated) in safety as a community without political rights within an Islamic state. The Islamic Jihad movement is even more extreme in its attitude to Jews in general.

Hamas has been consistent in declaring its intentions since its foundation. Their aim is to unite Palestine as an Islamic state within the original Mandatory borders. That should be a signal to King Hussein, not only to Israel, as to what will happen if Hamas comes to power. Their first target is, of course, the coastal plain and pre-1967 Israel as a whole. (Did the PLO truly give up such hopes despite its political maneuvering?)

We speak about Hamas as if it is homogeneous, but in reality it consists of different groupings and streams of thought. Hamas publications come from different sources and each venerated sheikh or religious scholar identified with the movement publishes his thoughts and sometimes they differ very much from each other. But they all agree on one thing: they oppose the existence of a Jewish Israel. To them this is part of the *Jihad*, a pillar of fundamentalist Islam, and all are bound to support the holy war, although they can differ on the tactics to achieve victory.

The growth of Hamas is an outcome of increasing hardship and poverty among the Palestinians, especially in Gaza, which drives them to cling to the promise of better days if they adopt fundamentalist Islam. Furthermore, expectations are always bigger when one lives so near to a relatively affluent community such as Israel, built on a territory which they consider their own. Moreover, whereas Arafat and the PLO in Tunisia lived off the fat of the land until recently, the Hamas leadership originated in the territories, sharing the same hardships with the people and winning their respect and admiration, especially in Gaza but not only there.

The escalation of Hamas' terrorism is definitely a result of the Oslo agreement. Their murderous activities attempt to prove to the Palestinians that their way is the right one, expressing the people's frustration with the agreement. At the same time, they endeavor to undermine Arafat's position and the "peace process."

Moreover, any Palestinian state in the West Bank — landlocked, poor, and surrounded by Israel and Jordan — will still face the desperation and pressure

of two or two and a half million Palestinians in the diaspora, living among Arab "brethren" who are not willing to integrate them or even to like them. Most of them wish to preserve their Palestinian identity and "right of return" (*Awda*).

To a large extent, the success of fundamentalism will be not so much an outcome of political discontent but of economic misery. There were and will always be fundamentalist tendencies in Islam. The only question is how powerful they will be, and economic hardship is an important component to advance the fundamentalist cause.

### Jordan's "Historical" Rights in Jerusalem

The playing off of Jordan against the PLO is no doubt one of Rabin's tactics, though not a major one. At the same time there is no question whatsoever that this was behind the very fact that we so willingly reaffirmed to King Hussein our recognition of the historical rights of the Hashemites in Jerusalem. What historical rights? If we look back at history, the Hashemites had no footing whatsoever in Jerusalem before 1948 when they conquered parts of Palestine and the Arab part of Jerusalem. Indeed, Transjordan did not exist before 1922 and had been part of Mandatory Palestine. The Hashemites continued to claim Hijaz in Saudi Arabia up until the 1950s. Being the offspring of the prophet Mohammad, and the rulers of Hijaz until 1926, the Hashemites always had the right to be the guardians of the holy places in Mecca and Medina, until they were chased out by the Saudi dynasty, but during all that time they never claimed the guardianship of the Temple Mount. At one time during the Iraq-Kuwait war, King Hussein began to use the title of "Sharif" (descendants of Muhammad), which was associated with Hashemite patronage of the holy places in Hijaz, and the Saudis became very upset. Indeed, until 1952, when the Hashemites ruled both Iraq and Jordan, the Saudis considered them a major threat to their position and their worst enemies because they thought the

Hashemites were plotting to regain control of their ancient homeland and the holy places of Islam in Arabia.

### Looking Again at the Allon Plan

What should Israel do? Israel's last fallback position was for a long time the Allon Plan, the one plan that still ensures Israel's ability to defend itself in its hour of need. Israel's Jordanian neighbors would have loved to see the Allon Plan implemented because they really do not wish to have a Palestinian state as a neighbor. In this Israel had a common interest with the Jordanians, until the Oslo agreement with the PLO.

There are still ways and means to fight terrorism, but most of them are going to undermine the Oslo agreement, which is a problem that Israel will increasingly face in the future and must solve if it is to survive. Yet solutions that entail massive use of force against fundamentalists engaged in anti-Israel terrorism and their supporters, or the use of collective punishment, can undermine the new respect and support that Israel has gained in the community of nations and the peace gradually achieved with most Arab countries. How Israel is to deal with such a paradoxical situation is a crucial problem for its survival and for the security of its Jewish population.

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