

HAMAS, HEZBOLLAH AND THE WAR IN GAZA:

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To comprehend the full meaning of the war in Gaza one must understand the goals of Hamas in attacking Israel and carrying out the horrendous and barbaric torture and killing of civilians on October 7, 2023. Some 1200 deaths and more than 240 people taken hostage made this the worst day for Israel since its birth in 1948. Proportionately, the attack is comparable to the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 that was responsible for the American led Global War on Terror.

The timing of the Hamas attack on Israel was clearly meant to derail the rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Israel. The goals of Hamas are clear from their 1988 Covenant. It states that "the Islamic Resistance Movement [Hamas] aspires to the realisation of Allah's promise" and quotes the Prophet as saying, "The Day of Judgement will not come about until Moslems fight the Jews (killing the Jews). . .".

With regard to international conferences the Covenant state: Now and then the call goes out for the convening of an international conference to look for ways of solving the (Palestinian) question. Some accept, others reject the idea, for this or other reason, with one stipulation or more for consent to convening the conference and participating in it. Knowing the parties constituting the conference, their past and present attitudes towards Moslem problems, the Islamic Resistance Movement does not consider these conferences capable of realising the demands, restoring the rights or doing justice to the oppressed. These conferences are only ways of setting the infidels in the land of the Moslems as arbitrators." This does not leave any hope for finding a long-term solution with Hamas if what Hamas calls the Zionist and Nazi state of Israel continues to exist.

The terrorism of Hamas has its roots in the more general issue of Islamic terrorism and its origin. And then there is the role of Iran and its creation, Hezbollah. Both are discussed below. The readers can then judge for themselves if there is any hope for a long-term solution to the so-called "Palestinian problem" any time soon.

Islamic terrorism is the most recent manifestation of the reaction to the fall of the great Muslim empires to the West. The last was the Ottoman Empire that was dismembered after the end of WW-I in 1918. Its sovereign ruled not only as a sultan over a specific state, but as the caliph, the head of Sunni Islam. As caliph he was the last of a line that traced itself back almost 1300 years to the Prophet Muhammad. The areas of Palestine and the Emirate of Transjordan (meaning East of the Jordan river), were both conceded by the Ottoman Empire after World War I, and it was then named and administered by the British starting in 1920 under the terms of the League of Nations mandate.

Today, with its poor governance, high birth rate, and low productivity, the Muslim world is falling ever further behind the West. Islamists find fertile ground for their claim that restoration of the caliphate will restore the greatness of the past—a past that, unlike the peoples of the West who often do not know their own history, Muslims have not forgotten. Islamists feel that the failures of the Muslim world are due to excessive modernization. They see their primary task as reinstating a purely Islamic way of life.

Al Qaeda, created around 1990 by Osama bin Laden and those around him after the Russians were driven out of Afghanistan, credit themselves not only with defeating the Russians in Afghanistan but also with the collapse of the Soviet Union itself. From this perspective, taking on the US isn't as silly as it appears.

The US is viewed as degenerate and demoralized. Significantly, Islamists call the US “the Great Satan”, following Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran. The term “Great Satan” should not be thought of in Christian terms since for Muslims it has the connotation of weakness. Satan is a seducer, and for Al Qaeda it is the seduction by America and its culture that represents the greatest threat to their brand of Islam.

In the Islamic world, Egypt and Egyptian writers play a predominant intellectual role. It should therefore come as no surprise that the effort to find a form of the modern nation-state

compatible with Islamist precepts apparently originated in Egypt with the Muslim Brotherhood, founded by Hasan al-Banna in the late 1920s. The Muslim Brotherhood, unlike many of today's Islamist groups, was willing to use modern political forms and processes, and was the first Islamic organization to call for an Islamic form of the nation-state. This is significant since, in many ways, Islamic fundamentalism can be viewed as a *reaction* to the modern nation-state.

Scholars and others have often pointed out that the term "Islamic fundamentalism" is inappropriate for designating what is also called here Islamist. The term "fundamentalism" really only applies to some branches of Protestantism, and gives the wrong idea of the division when used to distinguish Islamists from the Islamic mainstream. Nonetheless, the "fundamentalist" label has stuck and the press and even some scholars have begun to use the term. It will be used here interchangeably with Islamist.

While Islamic fundamentalism has a long history, it has become a significant factor in world events only since the 1970s. Its rise in modern times can be traced to the mid-1950s when Sayyid Qutb rose to prominence after he was arrested with the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood. Qutb was to become the main ideologue of modern Islamists. Qutb created a coherent ideology that can inspire many people to face their own death calmly for the sake of Islam and to kill in its name. Perhaps Qutb's most influential work was *Landmarks*, published in 1964. In it he accused contemporary Muslim societies of not adhering to the true Islam, and the Arabic word he chose to characterize these societies implied apostasy, the penalty for which is death. He also wrote a major, widely translated and distributed commentary on the Koran in thirty volumes called *In the Shadow of the Koran*—the final half being written in prison after Egypt's President Nasser cracked down on the Muslim Brotherhood following an attempted assassination. Qutb was hanged in Cairo in 1966.

Qutb believed the source of error in the world was the divorce between the sacred and the secular. He attributed this to the early Christians and nearly two thousand years of

ecclesiastical error. Qutb blamed the liberal idea that religion can be separated from secular life. He maintained that the Jews were eternally ungrateful to God. The Jews occupy a large part of Qutb's Koranic commentary. Qutb believed that Zionism was a part of the eternal campaign of Jews to destroy Islam. He also condemned those Muslims who had inflicted Christianity's schizophrenic separation of religion and secular life on Islam.

This may give a flavor of Sayyid Qutb's monumental work, but it does not do it justice. It is not a shallow work and must be answered in depth. But the answer must come from the Muslim world, from those Muslims who believe in an Islam compatible with modernity.

There is a major divide between Islamists. There are those who believe in the doctrine ascribed to Ayatollah Khomeini wherein the *Ulama*—those Muslims educated in the Koran and other Islamic works, and who represent Islamic learning—called by the Shi'ites Ayatollahs, have absolute authority, the state and politics falling entirely within the sphere of their absolute, divinely ordained authority. And, on the other hand, the Sunni Arab fundamentalists who believe the *Ulama* have been corrupted and must be replaced by visionaries who would return Muslim societies to a truly Islamic way of life. Both these factions disagree with mainstream Islam.

In the end, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism is about the conflict between the enlightenment and rise of the modern, secular nation-state, the impact of these developments on the Muslim world, and the demands of the Islamic faith as embodied in the Koran, the Sharia, and the Hadiths or Traditions. Islamists are out for power; they want to rule in place of existing regimes. But, nevertheless, the conflict is fundamentally one of ideas in the Muslim world and must be resolved there. As put by Johannes Jansen in his 1997 book *The Dual Nature of Islamic Fundamentalism*:

“A number of small fundamentalist groups have degenerated into a state of primitive rebellion. Their total lack of doubt concerning God and the Last Things is possibly to be

envied, but it cohabits with murderous designs on less favoured Muslims. This desire for murder has received its theological framework from Sayyid Qutb, who . . . died with a smile on his lips. The time may be coming when citizens of the Middle East who are not willing to die smiling will have to decide whether it is worthwhile to die fighting in order to forgo the privilege of being killed by men who are ready to die smiling.”



The Palestinian-Israeli conflict remains far too valuable a tool for manipulating public opinion for Arab countries to allow a settlement to actually occur. This is especially true for Iran, but for different reasons. They have little to worry about since the political and ideological split of the Palestinian people between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority leaves no credible and trustworthy leadership with whom to negotiate. No comprehensive settlement is in the cards for years if not decades to come.

A key to understanding the current situation in the Middle East is to recognize that the primary identity of its people is not with the state, but rather with their religion, sect, tribe and family. Following World War I, which ended some four centuries of Islamic Ottoman rule, Arab nationalism was imposed on the Middle East by the colonial powers of the west. Islamists believe that the modern failures of the Muslim world are a result of modernization following World War I and the imposition of nationalism. They believe that the greatness of the past can be had only by a return to a purely Islamic way of life—although they presumably also want to retain some of the benefits of modern technology, even if they reject the world-view that led to its creation.

With the advent of the Arab Spring, the uprisings and armed rebellions that spread across much of the Arab world in the early 2010s, Islamists were in ascension and it looked like they would soon rule much of the Middle East. They had come to the fore in Egypt and Tunisia, and were responsible for much of the chaos in Syria. In Libya, Qatar had provided shipments of weapons

to Abdel Hakim Belhai who founded the now disbanded Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, listed by the U.S. State Department as a foreign terrorist group. Afghanistan and Pakistan also became Islamic states after the complete withdrawal of American forces from the region. While Mali and other parts of Africa are not in the Middle East, and therefore not part of the discussion here, there also the Islamists have become a major destructive and polarizing force.

If nations coming under Islamic rule are poor, we can expect a religious and social structure not unlike that which is found in Pakistan or Afghanistan. If the nations are rich, usually from resource wealth, one has the model of the Gulf states and especially Saudi Arabia where religious edicts are enforced by state, mosque and society. While men's activities are strictly controlled, women have a much worse situation. According to Wahhabi Islam, which has now spread widely, men must obey Allah and women must obey men. This form of intolerant Islam results in the Shia Muslims of the oil rich Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia being oppressed and rejected as heretics. One should also remember that after the withdrawal of the Soviet forces from Afghanistan, it was Saudi funded madrassas in the region that led to the Taliban.

One of the key players has been the Muslim Brotherhood. Worldwide, the Muslim Brotherhood claims to have a presence in some eighty countries. It is especially strong in parts of Europe. With the Arab Spring, it had emerged publicly as a major political force in the Middle East. Hamas, established in 1987, has its origin in the Muslim Brotherhood and could well be considered their Palestinian chapter. Islamic Jihad, founded by Fathi Shaqaqi and other radical students in Egypt, also has roots in the Muslim Brotherhood and split from them in 1979. Shaqaqi was influenced by the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. He believed the liberation of Palestine would unite the Arab and Muslim world into a single great Islamic state. While Islamic Jihad and Hamas advocate violence to form Islamic states, as well as the destruction of the state of Israel, the Muslim Brotherhood presents a far more moderate face to the world. The difference is really about means rather than ends.

At the heart of the Muslim Brotherhood's ideology is the establishment of an Islamic state based on the Sharia in Egypt as well as in the states where its many offshoots are based. Generally, they believe this is to be done first by becoming popular with the people through good works and social welfare programs, and second by creating a political party—at least where there are elections—since once they have control of the state, society can be transformed by the implementation of Sharia law.

This approach was advocated by Hassan al-Banna. The violent overthrow of governments, as discussed above, was advocated by Sayyid Qutb, the father of Islamic terrorism.

In the end, there is no real ideological split between Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb—except the means of achieving their common goal. In particular—and the West should not be confused about this—both reject democracy, which they view as the rule of man over man rather than the rule of God through Sharia law. Democracy is an impiety. While in the Egyptian Brotherhood there are ideological fissures and some internal fragmentation in its organization, they have not as a whole renounced its core ideal of making Egypt an Islamic state.

It is crucial that one also understand the role of Iran and its proxy Hezbollah. Hezbollah, in a sense, owes its existence to the state of Israel in that it arose as a response to Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon. Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak, has famously been quoted as saying that, "When we entered Lebanon there was no Hezbollah. We were accepted with perfumed rice and roses by the Shia in the south. It was our presence there that created Hezbollah". Hezbollah was founded sometime between 1982-1985, the uncertainty being because it began during this period as an amalgam of various Shi'ite extremists whose exact time of coming together depends on the sources consulted. Of course, this was the time, specifically 16-18 September 1982, when the massacres at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps occurred. It has often been claimed that Israel was complicit in those massacres, but the reality is more nuanced. The massacres had more to do with sectarian divisions than with Israel.

During the war in Lebanon, the Lebanese President-elect Bashir Gemayel was assassinated, which completely destroyed Israeli Defense Minister Ariel Sharon's "grand plan". Sharon was completely unprepared and lost all control of the situation in which the massacre of Palestinians in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila led to American intervention and American pressure forcing an Israeli withdrawal. The massacre was not carried out by Israelis, but by Lebanese forces. No one disputes that Israel was in control at the time. The leader of the people who actually carried out the massacre was Elie Hobeika, a leader of the Christian Maronite Lebanese Forces known at the time as "Phalanges".

Hezbollah is based in the south of Lebanon with its primarily Shi'a population. Inspired by Ayatollah Khomeini, its forces were organized and trained by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, the premier force charged with, among other duties, responsibility for Iran's missile forces and control of the Strait of Hormuz. While Hezbollah has international operations, our concern here will be with its role in the Middle East.

These are then the principal parties: the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran, and, of course, Israel and the US. Syria also has a role in that Syria, under the minority ruling Alawites, an offshoot of Shi'ism, has served Iran as a transshipping point for weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon including thousands of rockets—some being the Fajr-5, which have a range of close to 50 miles. Iraq, having a majority Shi'ite population, was a player in the sense that Iranian weapons are flown over Iraqi air space to Syria.

The history of Iran, and its relations with the US, since the overthrow of Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953 by the intelligence agencies of the United Kingdom and the US, followed by the rule of Mohammad-Reza Shah Pahlavi until his overthrow by the Islamic revolution in 1979, is well known. It should therefore come as no surprise that the primary interest of Iran is to deter the US from constraining its influence in the area or directly attacking it. While Iran's interests may appear to be primarily local, they are actually global. Deterrence of the US must rely on, at this time—and this could change, only two options: threatening US

allies in the region or using pressure on Hezbollah to carry out terrorist strikes throughout the world. Iran would also like to protect its coreligionists throughout the region—where they are often discriminated against and considered heretics if not apostates—and perhaps its most important goal would be to be able to use the closure of the Strait of Hormuz as a credible threat against US and European intervention.

Rather than just as a threat, Iran would like to control the flow of oil from the Gulf. While unlikely in the near term, one should keep in mind that about a third of the population of the oil rich Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia bordering the Gulf is Shi'ite; this minority has become restive in the past. The majority population in Bahrain is Shi'ite and is ruled over by minority Sunnis. The Arab Spring led to their violent repression and the intervention of Saudi troops. The Sunni rule in the Gulf is far more fragile than it appears.

Closure of the Strait of Hormuz is a threat that has been implicit in Iran's relations with Saudi Arabia and the US for some time, but has only recently become explicit. From the Iranian point of view, however, long term closure is not currently credible since they know the US would intervene. But the threat is not empty since it could lead to panic in the oil markets. Even the threat of conventional attack against US allies, and Israel in particular, would not prevent direct US action. It is for this reason, and to counter the Israeli nuclear capability, that Iran pursued a nuclear weapons program. Remember, as quoted above, the response of the Indian defense minister when asked what lessons could be drawn from the first Gulf War: "Don't fight the United States unless you have nuclear weapons." The Arab countries do not trust Iran and should Iran succeed in its nuclear weapons program it would engender more nuclear weapons programs in these countries.

Iran not only has its proxy Hezbollah in Lebanon; it also has Hamas. And that is a bit of an enigma. Why would a Sunni offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood be willing to apparently represent Iranian Shi'ite interests? The answer is simple: wanting to preserve some semblance of impartiality in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, neither Saudi Arabia, Qatar or Turkey (now

headed by a “moderate” Islamic government) will directly ship arms to Gaza; Iran will and has done so for some time.

In January of 2009, it is claimed that Israeli jets attacked a weapons convoy in Sudanese territory. Apparently, the convoy of more than twenty trucks included Iranian Fajr-3 rockets with a range of around 50 km. In October of 2012, the Yarmouk weapons facility in the Sudanese capital of Khartoum was attacked because it was suspected that Iran was using this facility to stockpile and assemble anti-aircraft missiles, anti-tank weapons, and the longer-range Fajr-5 rockets capable of reaching Tel Aviv and Jerusalem from Gaza. Israel knew that many of the Fajr-5 rockets, weapons that were capable of changing the nature of the standoff with Hamas, had made it through to Gaza. Nor could Egypt not have known about these shipments. A previous flare up in Gaza gave Israel the chance to justifiably destroy many of these weapons.

The danger, of course, is the possibility that Hezbollah might open a second front in the north of the country, and unlike the Palestinians in Gaza, Hezbollah has thousands of rockets capable of striking Tel Aviv. But Iran is very reluctant to enter the Gaza conflict and is no doubt restraining Hezbollah.

Given this history, it is clear that there is no hope of reaching a long-term solution to the problems in the region, whether by creating two states or by another more credible arrangement such as a demilitarized autonomous region, without the effective elimination of Hamas.