



National Committee on American Foreign Policy

Where Leaders Meet

The Middle East: Islamic Law and Peace

Summary of the Roundtable on "Can Muslims Accept Israel in Their Midst?" May 9, 2001

Sponsored by the National Committee on American Foreign Policy

Dear Reader:

On May 9, 2001, the National Committee on American Foreign Policy convened a closed-door and off-the-record roundtable discussion on "Can Muslims Accept Israel in Their Midst?" The panelists were Muslim scholars at U.S. universities teaching Islamic law and former Muslim diplomats now residing in the West.

Because of the September tragedy in the United States and the relevance of this report to us and the West, the demand for it has skyrocketed. Hence the NCAFP is making the frank discussions that ensued and the conclusions that were reached by the discussants and summarized in the (not for attribution) report available to all concerned.

Sincerely,

George D. Schwab
President

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Introduction

Since the UN partition of Palestine in 1947 and the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, history seems to have repeated itself in the Middle East. Every time the players took one step toward peace or an armistice, untoward events produced setbacks and rekindled a combination of recriminations and violence. Exacerbating this dismal and tragic situation is the tendency of those involved in negotiations between the parties to gloss over the "difficult issues" (the future of Jerusalem, for instance). Actually, these seemingly insuperable issues stem from traditional religious and cultural differences. For years the National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) has emphasized the importance of locating and examining the "roots" of the problems in order to open the road toward a just and lasting peace in the Middle East.

After the collapse in July 2000 of the eight-year-old peace process inaugurated by the Oslo accord between Israel and the PLO, the Committee thought it useful to consider the cultural aspects of the 54-year-old conflict that centers on Arab opposition to Israel. As a first step, the NCAFP convened on May 9, 2001, a one-day roundtable consisting of a number of distinguished Arab and Muslim intellectuals¹ who are recognized experts in diverse fields concerning the Muslim world in general and the Middle East in particular. The thematic question proposed to the participants was "Can Muslims accept Israel in their midst?."

The purpose of this report is to make available to the foreign policy community the views that were expressed at the roundtable.

Theological Aspects

It was recalled by one panelist that the supremacy of Islam² constitutes the doctrinal motivation of "jihad" (holy war) that allowed Arabs to conquer a vast empire stretching from India and China to the Atlantic and Spain in the seventh and eighth centuries. Although jihad came to a virtual standstill in the second half of the eighth century, the apparent dilution in the spirit of conquest did not mean the definitive end of the holy war. The ulamas (theologians, jurists, or theologians-jurists) developed a theoretical justification based on the division of the planet into two sectors: Dar-al-Islam (House of Islam) and the rest of the world, Dar-al-Harb (House of War), whose inhabitants (infidels) would one day convert to Islam or at least live under its flag.

This panelist reminded the roundtable that among the consequences of the classical theory of the two "houses," which is still credible to a majority of Muslims both as individuals and as members of governments, is the absolute inadmissibility of a non-Islamic state inside the House of Islam. In other words, infidel rule of Muslims is absolutely intolerable, whereas the rule of infidels by Muslims is natural. Because it was conquered as a result of the orders of God, Palestine became an irrevocable part of the House of Islam.

Another participant noted that some jurists have drawn specific conclusions from the theory of the two houses: namely, that Muslims who, for any reason, live in the House of War should either disobey the laws of the country of residence when they contradict the Sharia (Islamic law) or leave their residences and go to any part of the House of Islam?³

In the view of one participant, as a further consequence of that doctrine, the state of Israel has no legitimacy whatsoever and will disappear one day. In this respect, as several panelists pointed out, Muslims often focus on what they consider to be the precedent of the Crusaders who created a



Christian kingdom in Jerusalem and were eventually forced to flee by Saladin. In a way the creation of Israel in 1948 elevated this episode of the twelfth century and the figure of the great Muslim hero to the status of exemplars for contemporary Muslims.

The opinion was also expressed that in light of the theory of the two "houses," one can understand the reluctance of many Arab leaders to accord formal recognition to the state of Israel. As one participant put it: Arab diplomats have coined the slogan "Peace Perhaps; Normalization No," recapitulating the judgment that seems to be impressed on the subconsciousness of most Arab diplomats and negotiators: Israel is unacceptable in the region.

Another participant observed that even among the so-called moderate Arabs and Muslims living outside the "House of Islam," the prevalent opinion is that Jews have no future in the Middle East. Moreover, even many Muslim immigrants in European countries are leaning toward militant Islamism.

Furthermore, it was observed that demography is playing itself out against the Jewish state: Arab Israelis will overwhelm Jews in a matter of a few generations inside Israel itself.

One participant recalled that the fundamentalist interpretations of the Koran that triumphed in the twelfth century have been kept alive by Muslim clerics. With the passing of time their impact and influence have diminished in society, especially with the rise of Arab nationalism after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the 1920s and decolonization after World War II. But following the June 1967 war, nationalism and socialism lost their attraction; instead, religious fundamentalism was revived and rapidly became "militant" in the wake of Ayatollah Khomeini's success in Iran. It was also observed that in the view of the proponents of militant Islamic fundamentalism, the greatest part of the world is still under the thumb of infidels mainly because Muslims failed to carry out the orders of God. They allowed their religion to be undermined by negligent or faithless rulers; the Sharia was not respected; it was abrogated or mutilated; therefore, in the view of such militants, the decadence and miseries of Muslim countries are signs of God's wrath. As a consequence, it is the duty of Muslims to abide strictly by the Sharia and overthrow their corrupt governments. According to the most radical militants, jihad should be resumed simultaneously on two fronts: at home (against corrupt governments) and outside (against the infidels of the House of War). It can take the form of classical warfare or what the West dubs as "terrorist" acts. It can adopt the form taken by the intifada, suicide bombing, individual shelling, or guerrilla or regular army attacks.

Notwithstanding the theological backdrop, all participants made the point that Islam, both in its past and in its present forms, is far from being monolithic. The Sunni (a majority of Muslims) reject Shiite doctrine concerning the imams (the direct descendants of the Prophet Muhammad through his cousin and son-in-law, Ali). In addition to these two main tendencies, there are many small sects such as the Druze or the Alawite (who rule contemporary Sunni Syria). Moreover, a panelist recalled that the practice of Islam varies in different countries and especially in non-Arab ones (Iran, Turkey, Indonesia, India, Pakistan, and so on). This panelist added that there are differences even among militant Islamic fundamentalists. Martyrdom, for instance, is a basic characteristic of Iranian Shiite doctrine that has now spread among Sunni militants. Moreover, the panelist said that although Shiite militant fundamentalists, both in Iran and Lebanon, follow Ayatollah Khomeini's teachings, Sunni extremists have their own guides.⁴ Another participant added that religious authorities in various countries have recently expressed different opinions about suicide bombings because suicide is "unambiguously condemned" by Islam; moreover, even in mainstream Islam, doctrinal and practical divergences often separate Muslim clerics.

Historical Aspects



One panelist affirmed that in the Muslim world, the historical perspective was "Islam against non-Islam." When Islam appeared in the seventh century and its proponents began their conquests in its name, they met Jewish communities in different lands but encountered no Jewish "entity" or state. Muslims fought against Christians and against Persians, not against Jews. The fate of Medina's Jews after the battle of Khaybar reflected the fact that they had sided with Meccans against the Prophet Muhammad. Muslim conquerors took Palestine from the Christian patriarch, not from any Jewish leader. There was no Jewish authority or entity in Palestine or, for that matter, elsewhere in the world. This panelist added that Arabs were naturally influenced by the "alien image" of Jews that Christians had created and by the anti-Semitism that was being spread in the West. There was no question of a Jewish "homeland" in those days. This participant further observed that for 1,400 years Islamic political literature had been preoccupied with Islam-Christian (East-West) relations. It was only toward the end of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century, with the issuance of the Balfour Declaration (and the publication of the "Protocols of Zion"⁵.) that the perception of Zionism, that is, political Judaism, became rooted in the Muslim world as the notion of a threat. As a result, a distinction between Zionists and mainstream Jews developed in the Arab world. But in recent years this distinction has tended to disappear under the spur of militant Islamism. Jews are gradually being viewed as "enemies of God" in the Arab and Muslim worlds.

As another panelist remarked, the "demonization" of Israel is used to justify politicians who lack legitimacy or are experiencing domestic difficulty. As one example he cited Syria where members of the minority Alawite sect rule a population consisting of a large majority of Sunnis. The Syrian rulers used political nationalism and theology as the bases for their rejection of Israel and coincidentally to justify their grip on power. Now that nationalism has lost its attraction, certain rulers are gradually adopting diverse forms of Islamism. Iran, one participant observed, is another case in point: The regime has been experiencing difficulties especially with the younger generation, which represents more than 70 percent of the population. Since Khomeini's death, the regime has increased its ideological opposition to Israel and has become more Palestinian than the Palestinians themselves. It is materially helping the Lebanese Shiite Hezbollah as well as the Sunnite Hamas and Islamic Jihad; in Tehran it has organized "international conferences" on Jerusalem and the intifada. It was observed that moderate voices tend to become silent in face of the mounting radicalism of Islamist militancy; at the same time in recent years, the masses have become more and more unwilling to accept the existence of Israel.

Several panelists underlined the fact that the opposition against Israel is not only based on religious feelings and beliefs but is also enhanced by the perception that the Jewish state is a completely "alien" element implanted in the midst of Arabs and Muslims. Not to be forgotten either is the fact that authoritarian regimes consider Israel's democratic institutions a direct threat to their own rule.

One participant remarked that to many Arab observers, the European Jews (Azhkenazis) came to the region not as "local" Middle Easterners but as Westerners or even "colonizers" (replacing the former British and French rulers). According to him, more often than not, the Oriental Jews (Mizrahis) adopt the Azhkenazi attitude, thus accentuating the "alien" character of the Jewish state.

Another panelist said that to Muslims in general and Arabs in particular, Israel emerged in the Middle East at the expense of the Palestinians and under the umbrella of the West and the United Nations, which was dominated at the time by the United States. In this respect Israel tends to be perceived as an instrument of the West, believed to be destined to "keep the Arabs divided."

One panelist observed that because the Arabs' rejection of Israel is not wholly based on theological causes and is, at least in part, thought to be attributable to their political and social "alien" character, their stance allows some room for "pragmatism" and "compromise." He remarked that history bears



witness to the fact that in the past, notwithstanding the doctrine of the division of the planet into two "houses," caliphs, sultans, and shahs sometimes "recognized" non-Muslim powers and often established economic, political, and cultural relations with them. Therefore, no matter how important and deep the obstacles may be, at least at the level of state relations, it should be possible to find ways of recognizing or at least tolerating the existence of Israel. Egypt and Jordan have concluded treaties with Israel. Although the "peace" between each set of signatories is rather a "cold" one, the element of diplomatic "recognition" exists and can be used to spur developments toward a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

According to one participant, it was the authoritarian nature of the Arab regimes that allowed leaders such as President Sadat, King Hussein, and Chairman Arafat to conclude accords and sign and exchange documents with the Israelis. If democracy existed in the region, this would have been impossible, for in most Arab countries the masses are thought to be more radically opposed to Israel than their leaders.

One participant went so far as to assert that of all the people of the region, the only ones ready to accept the existence of Israel are the Palestinians because they have lived and interacted with the Israelis especially since the 1967 war and the occupation of Gaza and the West Bank.

Cultural Aspects

It was underlined by a panelist that a deeply rooted "custom" called double-talk may explain why it is extremely difficult to ascertain the extent to which Muslims may or may not come to accept Israel in their midst. In this respect another panelist remarked that the Iranian clergy has elevated this form of indirection to the rank of a religiously admissible principle under the Persian name of *taghieh*. For instance, for a long time Shiites were considered heretics and had to hide their beliefs in order to escape death in the Muslim world. In a way, lying became a "strategy for survival." Therefore, it often happens that both Sunnite and Shiite militant Islamists use the vocabulary of international diplomacy and hide their ultimate goals behind "moderate" and "reasonable" affirmations; curiously enough, Western observers and officials tend to believe them and take their declarations at face value, forgetting that some Muslims consider it a virtue to deceive an infidel.

This participant reminded the panel that for many years Iranian officials have been denying any initiation, execution, or support of a terrorist act. Yet it is an open secret that the highest authorities ordered the murder of Iranian dissidents in foreign countries as well as inside Iran. For years the Iranian-backed Hezbollah asserted (and convinced Western journalists and diplomats to accept its word) that it would end its attacks as soon as Israel withdrew from its self-proclaimed "buffer security zone" in southern Lebanon. Its only aim, Hezbollah proclaimed, was the liberation of Lebanese national territory. Yet after Israel withdrew from Lebanon, Hezbollah continued its guerrilla warfare against the Jewish state as a means of helping Palestinians retrieve their lands. Now it proclaims that it is fighting for the liberation of "Muslim" territory.

It was also observed that although mainstream Islam eschews violence, the masses seem to approve terrorist actions against Israel and suicide bombers are hailed as martyrs and honored not only in their countries of origin but throughout the Muslim world. One participant showed Iranian postal stamps and posters honoring the assassins of President Sadat and other "traitors." Moreover, Iran and some other countries have named avenues after such so-called martyrs and heroes. All this seems to indicate a basic opposition to Israel both at governmental and street levels. In the final analysis, this relationship can be traced to ancient cultural traditions.



In this respect, as one participant said, deeply rooted psychological elements also come into play in the Middle East. For instance, one such element that stems from old tribal traditions is the "safeguard" of honor. The acquisition of dignity, the defense of one's honor, and the avoidance of humiliation constitute key values in Arab societies. The customary search for honor in public behavior often dictates the course of events. Granting equal status to strangers (or, for that matter, to "enemies") is harmful. It entails humiliation and therefore diminished stature in society. For instance, by going to Jerusalem and addressing the Israeli parliament and later signing a peace treaty with Begin, Sadat lost the "dignity and popularity" he had earned through the 1973 war and became the target of those who wanted to "restore the honor of the Arabs." Another example is the Muslim masses' perception of the withdrawal of American and French troops from Lebanon in 1983 as the "shaming" of the entire West and an honor to the terrorist whose suicide bombing forced their precipitous departure. More recently the unilateral withdrawal of Israelis from southern Lebanon was construed by the Arabs as a "military victory" of Hezbollah over the Jewish state.

Democracy, Secularism, and Islam

One of the panelists observed that inside Israel there existed a "peace movement" that allowed some members of the government to conduct the Oslo dialogue and eventually conclude an agreement with the PLO. Nothing of that sort is to be found on the Arab side. In no Muslim country has a "culture of acceptance" of Israel emerged. On the contrary, the idea of the rejection of the Jewish state seems to have solidified.

Nevertheless, as another participant remarked, Arabs are not monolithic, and one can find among them "competing ideas" about Israel and the West. For instance, one finds "nuanced positions" on the question of the "normalization" of dealings even among those who have relations or treaties with Israel; they believe that in the case of complete "normalization, "there would be no incentives left to convince Israel to address existing problems; some think that "normalization" would not be a "good policy" as long as the balance of power remains in favor of the Jewish state; the "hegemonic" tendency of Israel should be replaced by the practice of recognizing the "equality "of its neighbors.

The lack of democratic institutions in the Arab world and the authoritarian leanings of many regimes were mentioned by several panelists. Many militant Islamists consider democracy a "Western abomination"; indeed they maintain that a Muslim state has to be an "ideological state" that enforces Sharia. One participant expressed the opinion that at the governmental level many Arab countries want some kind of peace with Israel but have to take into account the opposition of their people. He reminded the panel that "the Arab street is often more radical than the Arab government"; from that perspective, the Palestinian problem is a "burden" to many leaders.

One participant observed that the absence of free media makes it difficult to appreciate the degree of opposition to the existence of Israel. But he warned that one should not generalize.

Several participants mentioned as a hopeful development the emergence of independent Arab newspapers in the West. They also referred to an independent television station in the Persian Gulf that, often to the dismay of local governments, is becoming a major source of information and has a rapidly growing audience in the Arab world. The spread of Internet cafes (as well as personal computers) in Muslim countries was also cited as a major aspect of political and cultural change. As a participant remarked, one can find in the Arab world an escalation of aspirations pertaining to democratic and human rights, on the one hand, and political reform, on the other. A cultural process that involves a mix of aspects of Islamic and Western cultures is gaining momentum.



In referring to trends in Iran and elsewhere, another participant stated that efforts to institute a "marriage of Islam and democracy" and to build adequate "institutions" had begun. Another spoke of the "incompatibility between Islam and secularism."

One participant mentioned a growing movement among younger Iranian clerics designed to elucidate religious interpretations in light of modern scientific knowledge. In his opinion, these efforts can help to lay the basis for the gradual emergence of "civil society" and democratic institutions.

The Case of Iran and Turkey

It was observed that no Jews are left in the Arab world (except for Morocco and a few individuals in Yemen and a few other countries). But one panelist remarked that in non-Arab Iran, the Jewish community in the capital and other major cities remains important. Iran and Israel have no territorial claims against each other. Before the Islamic Revolution they had close economic and security ties and "unofficial" diplomatic representations. This panelist underlined the fact that Iranian Jews came to the country at the time of Cyrus after their liberation by the Persians from captivity in Babylon. The Iranian Jewish community is more "integrated" than any other Jewish community in the world. The panelist said that many Iranian Bahais have settled in Israel since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

According to another participant, after the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini, Iran became the most uncompromising ideological foe of Israel. The Islamic Republic of Iran has been instrumental in transforming the Middle East conflict with Israel into a religious, ideological conflict, and Israel, according to another panelist, contributed to this change. It was stated that Ayatollah Khomeini and now his heirs (as Shiites in pursuit of leadership of the whole Muslim world) have used and continue to mine the Palestinian question. Iran is the sponsor and provider of the Lebanese Hezbollah and also gives material and financial support to Hamas and Islamic Jihad. The Islamic Republic of Iran considers Washington the voice of their Israeli and American Jewish foes. In this respect there is no difference between radical and moderate mullahs. They all are against Israel, as President Khatami has demonstrated in his fiery attacks against the Jewish state. But, as one panelist observed, contrary to the reactions found on the Arab street, in Iran the bulk of the population is not really concerned with the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Several participants cited Turkey as another exception in the Muslim world. Because of its secular constitution and the separation of state and religion, it recognized Israel in 1948 and continues to have close ties with it. But there too, things can change, as they changed in Iran after the shah's overthrow.

Discussion and Conclusions

The following remarks were made during the discussion that followed the participants' presentations.

Most participants agreed that Islam and secularization are incompatible; for instance, non-Muslims and women cannot have complete "equality" under Islamic law.

One panelist asserted that secularization leaves a vacuum that can be filled by Islamists. The separation of religion and the state is not an acceptable concept in Muslim countries; any solution must be included in a "religious context."



A majority of participants agreed that a non-Muslim state will not be tolerated in the long term in the Middle East.

One participant stated that the acceptance of Israel in the region would require Arab states to endorse "democracy, human rights, and cultural diversity," all of which are Western concepts not in line with Islamic mores. Such a change would entail revisions in the present interpretations of religious texts.

It was also observed that the resurgence of anti-Semitism in Europe and to some extent in the United States confirms and reinforces the Arabs in their adamant opposition to Israel. Even in countries that have concluded peace treaties with the Jewish state, the rejection of Israel is gaining momentum.

It was stated that the Taliban in Afghanistan may constitute a laboratory for evaluating the future of ideological warfare against Israel.

It was suggested that a "council" be created in the United States to listen to all Middle Eastern views, including humanistic ones. Such an exploration of different views might have a positive impact in the region.

One participant declared that the people-to-people program had worked well for two years during the peace process and should be resumed. Another participant remarked that such a dialogue had been possible because the strong Israeli movement in favor of peace had been able to influence the government; circumstances have now changed.

Several participants emphasized the urgency of the situation and the desirability, if not the necessity, of the United States taking a more active role to help restore a dialogue between the parties and revive the peace process.

One participant remarked that this would be beneficial only if the United States proclaimed and defended its own values; the United States should talk to its allies both in and outside the region; it should not take what Muslims say at face value; it should put the Middle East in perspective and pursue a coherent course of action instead of following its present policy zigzags.

Several panelists also mentioned the demographic aspect of the problems of the Middle East.



Notes

1. All Muslims are not Arabs. Some Arabs are Christians. The list of participants appears in the Appendix.
2. For Muslims in the Abrahamic family of religions, Islam is the most recent and the final message of God. As stated in the Koran, Muhammad is the "seal of Prophets," the last envoy of Allah. After him Allah will not send any additional prophet. The message of Islam is final. Moreover, Muslims consider that because the Koran was dictated to Muhammad by God's angel, its content consists of the words of God. Consequently, it cannot be changed or revised.
3. Prophet Muhammad's emigration from Mecca to Medina (Hegira, 622) is often cited as justification. Actually because of the persistence of this view, among other considerations, many Palestinians left their homes during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War in order to avoid living under Jewish rule.
4. In Egypt fundamentalists are influenced by Hassan al-Banna's and Sayed Qutb's ideas, whereas in Palestine they follow Sheikh Yasin; in Algeria Islamic Salvation Front militants abide by the works of jurist-theologian Ibn-Taymiya (thirteenth-fourteenth century) who, in the eighteenth century, also inspired Ibn Abdal Wahab. His doctrine (Wahabbism) was adopted by the Saudi tribe and is followed today in Saudi Arabia
5. The full title of this publication is *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, which, according to *Encyclopedia Juddica*, was a notorious forgery produced by an unknown author working for the secret police of the Czarist regime in Russia and plagiarizing an old French political pamphlet by Maurice Joly attributing ambition of world domination to Napoleon III. The *Protocols* continue to be disseminated in a number of countries, including the Arab countries.



Appendix

Participants: Roundtable on "Can Muslims Accept Israel in Their Midst?"

The Honorable Nassir Assar
Former Secretary General CENTO;
Former Iranian Ambassador to Turkey

Professor Ali Banuazizi
Professor of Cultural Psychology and Modern History of Iran, Boston College

Professor Peter Chelkowski
Professor of Middle Eastern Studies, New York University

Professor Bernard Haykel
Member of the School of Historical Studies at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton University
Assistant Professor of Middle Eastern Studies and History, New York University

The Honorable Fereydoun Hoveyda
Former Ambassador of Iran to the United Nations
Member of the National Committee's Executive Committee and Board of Trustees
NCAFP Project Coordinator, the Middle East

Dr. Muhammad Muslih
Professor of Political Science and Middle Eastern Studies, C. W. Post College, Long Island University, N. Y.
Visiting Scholar, Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies, New York University

Professor Walid Phares
Associate Professor of Political Science and Comparative Politics, University of Miami and Florida Atlantic University

Mr. Amir Taheri
Editor of *Politique Internationale* (Paris, France)
Columnist for *Asharq Alawsat*, a pan-Arab daily newspaper (London)

Moderators

Dr. George D. Schwab
President
National Committee on American Foreign Policy

The Honorable Fereydoun Hoveyda
NCAFP Project Coordinator, the Middle East; Islamic Law and Peace

