

THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE ISRAEL/PALESTINE CONFLICT

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Abstract: *The role of religion in the Israel/Palestine conflict is deeply rooted in the relationship between the religion, the land, and the history of displacement of both peoples. The land's significance is shared by both Abrahamic religions (Judaism and Islam). Scripture emphasises this geographical significance however, it is entirely too narrow to demote the issue to that of a purely religious conflict. The Israel/Palestine conflict is one of*

multiple intertwined factors formed over time and not only in the disputed land, but also in Israeli and Palestinian identities. This conflict has a long history of exile, persecution, and displacement on both sides. Furthermore, there is not merely two actors in the this conflict, external intervention has been consistent and influential.

Keywords: *security, Israel, Palestina, conflict, religion.*

INTRODUCTION

Israel is located on the holy land of three major religions. It has been home to many societies and cultures, among which the Jewish people of the past as per recorded in scripture. The formation of current Israel however, is in an entirely different context. It was that of the displacement of the Palestinians people. Palestinians which had before they were uprooted, lived in the area for the longest period of any peoples in what has been a much-disputed area. Palestinians lived alongside Jewish and Christians communities with no major conflict, certainly nothing like Israel/Palestine currently. The formation of Israel was largely the outcome of external intervention from large powers in the Levant and the Middle East. Western powers France and Britain divided up a post-war Ottoman Empire, with disregard for the previous commitments made to the region and began the idea of Israel through the Balfour Declaration of 1917. This breathed life into an idea which in light of a Jewish exilic period marked with persecution and violence particularly in Europe, manifested itself in the modern Zionist movement¹. Zionism refers to the national movement and idea of a return for the Jewish people to their historic homeland².

THE RELIGIOUS ASPECT OF THE CONFLICT – ROLE AND CONNECTION

The religious aspect of the conflict mostly lies in the fact that Judaism and its scriptures emphasise the connection of the Jews to the land, a land which shares its significance with Islam and Christianity. This connection to the homeland is sternly emphasised in Zionist and nationalist narratives in Israel. With that in mind, Judaism especially during its exilic period developed and has with most Israelis maintained a secular and quietist interpretations of its traditions. It is essential to note however, that Judaism and Israeli nationalism have overlaps in contemporary Israel especially with regard to settlement policy. The role religion plays in the Israel/Palestine conflict is one engraved in the histories of the region and the people who have resided there. The Jewish people's religion is also their ancient history, and their ancient history is the foundations of their connection to God³. This does not mean that religion is the primary or deciding impetus for conflict, it rather has an unescapable connection due to historical developments, current politics, and the dynamics of the conflict. The role of religion in the Israel/Palestine conflict will be looked at through; firstly, the Jewish religious texts and the

Zionist movement, the history of the occupation and colonialist practises, and finally the occupation and settlement policy as the re-occurring issue.

The Jewish people are the chosen people of God according to their scripture. Deuteronomy refers to this multiple times, for example 14:2 ‘out of all peoples on the face of the earth, the Lord has chosen you’⁴. This exclusivist claim is accompanied by a special relationship with the land of modern day Israel, mostly expressed in Genesis following the story of Abraham. The land’s importance grows in the context of Joshua’s conquest of Canaan ‘our territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates—all the Hittite country—to the Mediterranean Sea in the west’⁵. One of course cannot forget the plagues that struck Egypt when they opposed the Israelites and their leader Moses who later heard the commandments of God and split the sea for his people. God’s deed in compelling the Egyptians to let the Israelites go. This bares relevance in contemporary times when introduced with the concepts of Geulah meaning redemption or deliverance. Galut is the opposite of Geulah, it literally means exile. Galut is ‘the uncovering, or denuding, of the land of Israel of its inhabitants’⁶. Geulah also refers to the ransoming and redeeming of property that used to be theirs, this has connections to Teshuva which is the repentance when combined they can be used as a justification for a return to the holy land. This has provided a rationale for Zionists in their search for a route to back to ‘homeland’, as even bringing about the Messianic times. However, some religious Jews would argue vehemently against the Zionist notion that has come to fruition. They would argue it is against the Judaic faith to end the exile before the return of the Messiah, for he has not redeemed them yet⁷.

With that in mind, Zionism needs to be understood in the context of persecution of Jews. The very long exilic/diasporic period was marked with persecution, the idea of Aliyah developed as an aspiration for the Jewish diaspora that was exiled since the times of the Romans. Aliyah came to fruition only upon the development of the Zionist movement in the late 19th century⁸. Jewish people faced persecution and exile in Rome, persecution in Russian pogroms, and of course the Holocaust. This violence that the Jewish diaspora has endured, largely unlocks the possibility of Jews to take on a Zionist and conflictual understanding

of scripture. It mobilises Zionist rhetoric as a safe haven for Jews in a world that could be perceived as hostile to them. Such a rhetoric would be suitable for someone who does not follow the religion strictly, but rather only derives inspiration from religion. Which again could effectively serve as an identity which only fortifies the desire for a return and in the case of Palestinians, emphasises otherness. This could especially be the case for Jewish peoples as there is a strong secular tradition developed during the exilic period. This of course points to the contrary of the previous paragraph in that religious texts serve Zionist only as a point of reference and justification for actions. With that being said, authorities and nationalist figures make references to biblical and historical violence when discussing Palestinian and even regional conflict. An example of this could be seen in the comparison of Arabs to the ancient tribe of Amalekites, a tribe which was destroyed upon the command of God in Samuel 15:3 because they were a barbaric one ‘Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy all that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys’⁹. Elliot S. Horowitz refers to interviews from reported Jeffrey Goldberg with prominent Israeli nationalists; ‘the Palestinians are Amalek... we will destroy their ability to think as a nation’, in another interview this time with Likud party member and activist Moshe Feiglin, he was told the ‘behaviour’ of the Arabs was that of the Amalek¹⁰. Such explicit religious references to the contemporary show that there is at least a perceived religious dimension to the conflict even if religion is not the source of grievance. Gideon Aran and Ron E. Hassner highlight the potential danger of this in that ‘the divine serves as a model for human emulation (imitatio dei)’ in the ‘Hebrew image of God’¹¹. If this is regurgitated and promoted in a political manner as per shown in the quotations above it could be portrayed that Palestinians are hindering Jews in their return to the homeland, therefore all means are justified in the conflict. An idea connected to both scripture and nationalist identity of the past and present.

The Balfour Declaration of 1917 opened up the idea of a return for Jewish people to their homeland however it also stated that this should not infringe on the existing non Jewish population there. The Second World War resulted in a large immigration

of Jews into Palestine, of course in the context of the persecution faced in Europe at the time. In 1947, the UN partition of the two was seen as unsatisfactory for all and this led to the first Arab-Israeli war in 1948, which resulted in Israelis controlling large parts of the region after neighbouring Arab states also got involved. Israel ended up with a large territory and declared their independence¹². Thousands of Palestinians fled or were expelled from their homes and land, many believed the figures were upward of 700,000 however Israelis usually recognised figures much lower than that¹³. This is commonly referred to as the ‘An-Nakbah’ among Palestinians meaning catastrophe, while Israeli’s refer to this period as ‘the war for independence’ or ‘Liberation’¹⁴. This left a lot of Palestinian property empty so the state decided to give it to Jewish settlers¹⁵. The 1967 ‘six day war’ led to the complete occupation of Palestine and also land from the regional states that participated¹⁶. ‘During the first decade of the occupation, the Labour governments operated on the basis of the Alon Plan, which advocated the establishment of settlements in areas perceived as being important for Israel’s security and where the Palestinian population was relatively sparse’. The settlement policy changed upon the arrival of the Likud into power (1977), a government with fundamentalist influences and one that saw Palestinians as a direct threat to Israelis. Likud’s settlement plan established settlements in the ‘densely populated mountainous ridge of the West Bank’, it was a policy that explicitly stated their use of settlement policy as a way of preventing Palestinians to achieve political unity. This is encouraged even today by the fact that Jews all over the world are welcomed to disputed territories with privileges of land and property that is not equal for Palestinians, the ‘law of return’¹⁷. In the words of a former Prime Minister of Israel Ariel Sharon ‘Everybody has to move, run and grab as many hilltops as they can to enlarge the settlements because everything we take now will stay ours... Everything we don’t grab will go to them’ – As foreign minister on radio broadcast in 1998¹⁸. Israel created and has continued with a policy of taking land since declaring their independence, this has been expressed by authority which has arguably normalised occupation making Israeli citizens largely impartial¹⁹.

The balance of power is very uneven as Palestinians have no way of even expressing grievance, policy is designed to seclude them and any response is

generally treated with a heavy hand. Walls have been raised around settlements and architecture is used and designed to alienate and reinforce the occupation²⁰. Walls create a dynamic of othering Palestinians and Israelis to the degree of occupier from the Palestinian perspective and on the Israeli side the Palestinian as a security concern. The occupation has even gone to the degree of Israelis controlling of water sources exacerbating the conflict and occupation. All of this can be seen as an entirely secular aspect of the conflict, a dynamic of occupation carried on by an Israeli state that is nationalist at its core and identity. In light of the severity of the occupation and the policy of othering from the Israelis, space and territory becomes the biggest grievance. Religion is largely irrelevant in what is a normalised dynamic of rooting people out. However, it could be argued that the justification for any of this would be non-existent if it weren’t for the Jewish religious claim to the land making the conflict religious at least on a surface level. On the other hand, one could see this as more of an identity expression as Judaism has a long secular history. Furthermore, persecution was what largely mobilised the idea of a return to the ‘holy land’ and as previously discussed the idea of return is seen as premature in the eyes of some Judaic interpretations. The idea is that the Jewish occupation morally goes against Judaism and its only religious justification is not valid as return to the holy land is only destined to happen upon the arrival of a messiah²¹ therefore Israel is in a way rushing prophecy. There is an argument to be made that it is western colonialism that is the influence of what has become modern Israel, the Israeli state practises closely resemble those of Western colonialism in history and in fact one of the few remaining colonisers²².

Settlement policy and its colonial nature is the driving factor of conflict. Even though on occasion reinforced by religious expressions of the conflict, these can always be attributed to secular grievances originating from the settlement policy. Even explicit religious motivations for the conflict are always in one way or another connected to non-religious reasons most often Israeli settlement policy and the occupation in general. This makes any religious justification only a factor, if not a manifestation of what is fundamentally a geo-political dispute. This is because the only re-occurring issue in the conflict is displacement. Even though these things can be traced back to some religious aspects, it is merely

a manifestation. Religion is only a factor in what is essentially a security concern for Jewish people and a prolonged occupation for Palestinians. The two sides have begun to see each other as nothing more. Most examples of religious violence are connected to settlement policy and general territorial grievances. One might argue that the land is special to Israelis so this can be seen as a religious motivation however, as the movement that led to the return was largely secular as well as the secular nature of the Israeli authority makes this a questionable line of argument. The occupation is the re-occurring source of conflict and grievances, whereas religion does not re-occur. The majority of separate incidents of violence all have at least some association with settlement policy²³. Instances of upheaval on the Palestinian side is, needless to say reactionary to the occupation. Palestinians mostly express their grievances in a non-religious and non-violent way for example through peaceful protest, generally because the Israeli government have a heavy hand when it comes to any Palestinian response so this has been the most effective way. The occupation directly attacks Palestinian national, and in some cases ethnic, and religious identity. Any manifestations of geo-political concerns in a religious manner, would potentially be for greater vigour and in search of support. Perhaps as an expression of collective identity versus an adversarial one. On the Israeli side, religion plays a larger role at least on the surface as authorities use religion as a means of justification and mobilisation of the occupation.

In conclusion, the role of religion in the Israel/Palestine conflict is rooted in the relationship between the religion, the land, and the history of displacement of both peoples. The land's significance is shared by both Abrahamic religions (Judaism and Islam). The exclusivity expressed by the historic and some contemporary Jews because of the idea that they are God's chosen people is not as significant any more in light of the secular and quietist developments of the religion during the exilic period. However, the long exilic period was also marked with many instances of persecution and violence against Jewish people which created somewhat of justification for nationalist manifestation of religion. Persecution made possible a more nationalistic view of Judaism, which in time was easily attached to some of the religious violence expressed in religious texts of the Jewish people. The

Zionist movement began so a safe haven for Jews could be created. The intervention of large powers made the creation of contemporary Israel possible and the displacement of the Palestinian people ignited the conflict we see today. This conflict has brought about seemingly religious motivation for violence. However, religion is never the leading or only cause for conflict as Israeli occupation and settlement policy has been the largest and only omnipresent issue. As settlement, territory, and historic disputes are reoccurring, and religious motivations are not, the role of religion is limited. Conflict usually arises from the largely secular nationalist side which deals with the occupation and currently leads the government's settlement policy. The severity of the occupation and the normalisation of it can serve as the fuel of the conflict by itself. The walls create an othering that makes Israeli settlers indifferent and Palestinians even more frustrated. The state seems to build architecture for the sake of continuing occupation. Aspects of the occupation such as the control of water supply means that the occupation is the driving factor. A point can be made in that the persecution which created this potential for Israeli religiously expressed violence, is similar to the geopolitical grievances Palestinian people are currently experiencing and in turn manifesting them religiously as an expression of collective identity. With that being said, Palestinians mostly express their grievances in a non-violent as well as non-religious way usually through peaceful protest.

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