

# Secularism in the Middle East, Palestine as an Example

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Once, my wife and I were riding in a cab when the driver looked at her and asked, “Are you from Abood?” (Abood is a Christian village in the West Bank.) I laughed and replied, “Is it because she is not veiled?” The driver was embarrassed and apologized. Noticing that he was in his fifties, I asked, “Would you have asked this question twenty years ago? Would it have even occurred to you that only Christian women would be unveiled?”

A visitor to Palestine can easily figure out the imbalance between right-wing Islamism and secularism if only women’s dress codes in the streets are taken into consideration. More and more, seeing an unveiled woman is taken to mean that either she is a Christian or she is from a communist family, since the term *communism* in the Palestinian street equals *secularism*. Twenty years ago the vast majority of women did not wear the veil, and they would not have been immediately connected to either of those categories. Now the majority of women wear veils.

In the late 1960s, the Palestinian parties and factions that formed the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) were identified as secular. Today the situation is different. Fatah, the largest faction within the PLO, competes with Hamas to appear as religious. The Palestinian Authority’s television and radio stations broadcast as many religious programs and shows as Hamas media do, if not more. The members and supporters of Fatah and a large number of other secular parties—even those that claim to be Marxists—are quite religious. One can argue with confidence that the religious stream has ousted the secular and dominates the Palestinian masses in calling for the so-called Islamic awakening.

How and why has this happened? Why were Palestinian streets dominated by secular groups just thirty to forty years ago, and why has their role deteriorated and left the space for the Islamic streams to take over and dominate the mainstream? One can perhaps say that this early conflict in Islam was between religion and secularism.

This situation can be explained by an accumulation of many different factors. They include the influence of Palestinian cultural heritage; colonialism; Zionist occupation and its division of the Arab homeland and control of its resources; and Saudi oil money and its dominance over the media, as well as numerous secondary factors such as Arab authoritarian tyrannical regimes and lack of democracy, freedom, and respect for human rights.

## Palestinian Cultural Heritage

Two streams of thought dominated the region by the end of the Rashidi era (end of the seventh century). The first, identified as the “thought stream,” was based on the importance of the mind in dealing with social problems and explaining and interpreting the holy text through

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its context. The second stream understood and followed the Koranic text, the *Sunnah nabawiyah* (the Prophet's tradition), and the *khulafah*'s (the Muslim leaders') steps and the *sahabeh* (the Prophet's companions-friends), viewing them as the only acceptable source of legislation and laws. Based on this understanding, these "laws" are immune from any changes or amendments and are applicable to the society. This stream was called the "copying stream," as it believes in copying the words, behavior, and actions of Prophet Muhammad and his early successors.

In the first Islamic era, the two streams existed side by side. With the beginning of the Abbasid golden era, the thought stream (the secular stream) dominated the copying stream. Khalifa Ma'mun was a follower of that stream—through the Mu'tazilah movement—and hence during his reign he strengthened the thought stream at the expense of the copying stream.

The thought stream was based on scientific, secular, and logical argument. It focused on human judgment (everything, including the Koranic verses, is subjected to thinking). It also rejected anything that contradicts rational thinking even if it was pointed out in the Koran. Hence all Sunna and practices of the *khulafa* and *sahabeh* were to be subjected to reviews, discussions, and disagreements. The dominance of this stream opened the doors to learning and knowledge, including openness to Greek philosophy; to Persian, Indian, and Chinese cultures; and to learning from Indian astronomy.

This openness to the world resulted in the rise of many philosophers and Muslim scientists and the flourishing of Islamic civilization in the East and in al-Andalusia (in Spain). But the conflict between the two streams continued, and after three to four centuries the dominance of the thought stream was overcome by the copying stream, and the thought stream almost completely retreated from the public spheres.

The dark ages of the Islamic civilization started at the end of the tenth century and continued to the beginning of the twentieth century, paralyzing and controlling the Arab and Islamist mind. Legislations made fourteen centuries ago were brought to life and argued as appropriate for all societies at all times and places. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, education in the Middle East was lim-

ited to learning the Koran and to instruction in religion and the Arabic language. Natural sciences were accepted later, after the collapse of the Ottoman state at the beginning of the twentieth century. The previous ten centuries have involved tremendous retardation in terms of logical and creative thinking. Although natural and modern human sciences are taught in schools, students learn not through research and experiment but through dictation, the very tool used by the copying stream. It is obvious that teaching sciences by dictation and memorization does not help free or develop the mind.

The eleventh-century Arab philosopher Abu Ala' Ma'arri summarized the difference between the two streams in the following way: there exist two lives on earth, the one with a mind but with no religion and the one with religion but without a mind.

### Colonization

The Arab Islamic world understood how far it had regressed, upon the arrival of Napoleon Bonaparte to Egypt. This is when Arabs were exposed to the progress of the West and the backwardness of the East. The conflict between the thought stream (rational thinking) and the copying stream erupted again and marked the beginning of the Enlightenment era. It must be noted that the main thinkers who called for openness to European civilization and modernization were religious men, notably Abdul Rahman Kawakibi, Muhammad Abduh, and Jamal al-Din Afghani, among others.

The occupation of the Arab land by Europeans revitalized the debate between the two streams. While the European occupiers symbolized secularism in appearance and attitude, they resorted to oppression, confiscation of resources, and theft and deprived the colonized of freedoms and independence. Consequently, secular parties, unions, and organizations within the thought stream that aimed at communicating with the Western civilization, and were open to all philosophies, had to fight against the European occupation. Their resistance and mobilization efforts led the occupiers to direct their entire oppressive force to crushing that secular movement.

The occupiers found the copying stream a safer alley. Not only did they not oppose the

stream's actions and religious organizations, but they also directly, morally, and physically supported it to fight the secular forces. The most obvious cases were the British acting as godfathers of the Wahhabi movement in Saudi Arabia and acting indirectly as allies of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers.

### Zionism and Israel

In full coordination with the British occupiers, the Zionist movement succeeded in occupying Palestine and expelling its people in 1948 and then again in 1967, hence creating this ongoing tragedy for the Palestinians. The Zionist occupier has marketed a much distorted image for the secular movement, since it arrived in Palestine. The distorted image was designed particularly to influence the Palestinian and Arab mainstream. As was the case with the previous colonial occupier, the responsibility of standing up to the new oppressor fell on the newly formed secular forces. This decade-long struggle saw the failure of the Palestinian-Arab secular groups, which benefited the Zionists. The most notable defeats of the Arab seculars were those of Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt and the Baa'th regimes in Syria in the 1967 war. Consequently, the Palestinian tragedy deepened, and Arab dignity was badly harmed. Other resistance forces emerged and operated under the umbrella of the PLO. As a committed secular force the PLO was prominently valued by Palestinians for more than twenty years. But its confrontations with Israel did not gain any genuine success for the Palestinians.

It is interesting to note that Israel, throughout its confrontations with the PLO, has depended on and supported the "copying" stream. This support was not limited only to the meetings of the former prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin, with the Muslim Brothers' leaders, but it went further by providing all possible financial, moral, and political support to the Muslim Brothers, later Hamas, during their fight with the PLO. Israel's goal was to weaken the PLO and create an alternative for the PLO's historical role.

The Islamic stream did not really struggle with occupation after the war and the occupation of 1967; it focused mainly on struggling

with the secular groups. In a sense, Israel armed this alternative in order to blow out the seculars, to limit their influence, and to marginalize them. Hence Israel disregarded and turned a blind eye to the Islamists' activities, including their source of funding and their publicity, which were not directed against Israel. Consequently, the Islamic streams flourished and grew at the expense of the secular forces. In fact, the Islamic stream became even stronger after the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, as it proved to be corrupt and incapable of addressing either people's national aspirations or their daily lives and practical concerns.

### The Petrodollar and Saudi Arabia

The Wahhabi movement represents the most backward radical Islamist stream. It was the British occupier that designed and implemented the alliance of the Saudi royal family and the Wahhabi movement that grew to become the most powerful Islamist stream. The strength of this stream, as is well known, is the oil money and the unconditional Western support. To link the Saudi Wahhabis' support to all Islamist groups and streams that oppose secularism would not be an overstatement.

The Saudi regime, which is the most anti-democratic, anti-human rights, antiliberty, and antisecularist of all Middle Eastern regimes, has provided the Wahhabis with money and facilities. Fundamentalist religious books and other materials are widely printed with the financial support of the Saudis. They dominate the market in printing quality and quantities and sell at low prices on the streets. Secular literature is vanishing in Palestinian and Arab bookstores. The petrodollars have established dozens of television satellite channels open to the Wahhabis' ideology and closed to any secular trends. This fund is also allocated to hundreds of associations, movements, and coalitions of political Islam, almost in every Arab country. Resources and facilities are ready and geared to pay and buy known scholars in different fields just to serve the "copying" stream and lock away the minds of Arabs. Needless to say, the Saudi regime is involved in all these activities while it has the full support of the United States, Israel, and all European countries.

The failure of the secular streams to eliminate the “heritage” of colonization and resolve the social problems resulted in the establishment of states that resemble the Saudis in many ways. These oppressive Arab states have grown to become antiseccular and supportive of the religious trends. The best example was Anwar Sadat in Egypt. We now live in a situation where the secular powers, such as Fatah in Palestine and the ruling party in Egypt, compete with the religious streams by adopting and lobbying for fundamentalist religious thought. The viewer of a formal Arab television channel cannot miss this fact. The massive control on Arab media has blocked to a great degree the possibilities for secular movements to reach out to people.

Having said all this, we need to ask ourselves, is the big success of the fundamentalist stream, and its dominating of Palestinian streets in particular and of Arab streets in general, a full triumph, complete and long lasting? The fact on the ground states that the spark of conflict is still there and the fundamentalist Islamist stream is not completely and definitely victorious.

There are several factors that work in favor not of the fundamentalists but of the seculars. One is that in Palestine, for instance, Hamas’s success has been the result of the obvious failure of the PLO in carrying forward the Palestinian cause. Hamas claims that it has the solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It also asserts that it has the response to the socioeconomic issues that the Palestine Authority failed to address. All this is presented under the slogan “Islam is the right solution.” However, Hamas has no program for working out the conflict with Israel. The tactics and tools Hamas uses are not really working. While it depends now on the money flowing from the Gulf, and Saudi Arabia in particular, it still has no economic and social development plans and, for that matter, no capacity to come up with a realistic one either. Hamas relies on the external support coming from Saudi and Iranian sources to keep it going. It is clear, as it was with the PLO, that there is no future for Hamas’s plans.

Just like the Wahhabis and the Muslim brotherhoods, Hamas tries hard to isolate the citizens (Arabs) from the rest of the world. But

the globalized media and the space provided by Western modern telecommunications do not allow Hamas to fulfill this goal of blocking the flow of information from reaching the minds of Palestinians and Arabs. These modern means of communication activate the mind, in spite of the intense religiosity projected in advertisements, drama, and preaching. It is true that many social scientists are paid to lobby for the Islamists, using their discourse and interpreting scientific knowledge from religious perspectives. This might work for a while, but not for long.

Another factor in favor of the seculars is that the crises of tyrant Arab regimes are intensifying and their dependency on the United States and other colonial powers does not really provide much help. On the contrary, it becomes clearer every day that Saudi Arabia’s and the Gulf region’s money and their many religious programs cannot offer solutions to the actually existing problems. The chances are for the secular forces to revive again. In the past two decades those forces have shrunk away. The intellectuals, writers, philosophers, and poets have bended to the passing storm. They were afraid and retreated. But there is stimulus for them to rise again. There is now an extensive supportive international front. It only takes some courage and readiness to get the wheels moving. This trend can be seen vividly in Palestine and in other parts of the world.

Secular intellectuals and rational thinkers have made a fatal mistake by leaving the field of religious thoughts, philosophy, and interpretations to fundamentalists. This has given the copying stream and right-wing Islamists a platform to use and abuse. They have used religion to communicate their agenda and gain popular support with minimal resistance. Secular intellectuals have withdrawn from responding to Islamists’ claims and self-serving religious opinions. For a long time the average citizen was left to the mercy of the Islamists’ massive propaganda machines and the media, which shape his or her perceptions and action. Rational thinkers cannot leave the area of religious studies completely to the fields of popular culture and music. When a glass is left empty, it will inevitably be filled with air. S