

Identity and Religion in Palestine: The Struggle between Islamism and Secularism in the Occupied Territories

Loren D. Lybarger

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In recent years a subtle but steady transformation has been taking place in the Arab-Israeli conflict. The prominence of Hamas and the process of Islamization in the West Bank and Gaza are having repercussions on both a local and a regional level, while politics, faith, and nationalism have created a *mélange* of ideologies. As secularist squares up to Islamist, and Hamas and Islamic Jihad vie with the Palestinian Liberation Organization, the objective of the Palestinian struggle becomes trampled in the haste to draw support to either political group. In the midst of this turmoil, Palestinian secular-nationalists are defying their ideological background and turning to religion for support, hope, and survival. The Palestinian political identity is in a state of flux, and Islam's dominant role in Palestinian society can no longer be ignored or dismissed. The emergence of Loren D. Lybarger's *Identity and Religion in Palestine* is, then, a timely publication, as it provides a perceptive analysis of political identities in the Occupied Territories.

Through his debut publication, Lybarger draws on interviews and experiences gathered during volunteer work with the Mennonite Central Committee in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and Gaza. Conducted over a period of six years – three in the 1980s in the West Bank, two in Gaza in the early 1990s, and one in the West Bank and Gaza from 1999 to 2000 – the author breathes life into accounts of the evolving Palestinian political identity by rendering his respondents' dilemmas, vulnerabilities, hopes, and fears with startling clarity. By incorporating a plethora of political factions, religious communities, age groups, geographical locations, and socio-economic classes, he cogently assesses the Palestinian political and religious identity. Equally, his book deepens one's awareness of the relationship between events and the cultural and historical forces that transform the region's social movements and political identities. Over the course of five chapters and an epilogue, Islamism and secular-nationalism are defined both in theory and practice, thus affording a comprehensive insight into the contemporary Occupied Territories.

Opening with a chronology tracing events between 1948 and 2000, chapter 1, "Islamism and Secular Nationalism," establishes the precepts of

secular-nationalism and Islamism. In accordance with the former, Palestine would be a multi-faith entity with equal rights for all enshrined in a single constitution. Moreover, the term *Islamist* delineates “those for whom Islam has come to mean a specific type of religio-political identity and those for whom Islam may instead be a personal religious (Islamic) [*sic*] orientation or practice existing alongside, or integrated within, a type of multiconfessional nationalism” (p. 3). Having explored both theories, Fatah’s visual and demographic components are then analyzed, revealing a calculated image that integrates the diverse constituencies of Palestinian society, from university students and new professionals to villagers and shop owners. While twenty pages of analysis is possibly too few to fully explore each movement’s intricacies, the author’s introduction serves as a basis from which to analyze subsequent case studies.

Chapters 2 (“The Secular-Nationalist Milieu”) and 3 (“The Islamist Milieu”) comprise interviews that demonstrate the multiple facets of Palestinian secular-nationalism and Islamism. Compelling and evocative, the respondents provide vivid insights into the changes raging through their society. Confronted by the dilemma of nation or faith, loyalties are often defined by kinship rather than individual choice. Sabr, a twenty-eight-year-old resident of a Bethlehem-area refugee camp, and Mujahida, a resident of Thawra Camp, provide the most noteworthy accounts concerning recruitment and involvement in secular-nationalist and Islamist organizations. For Sabr, the prospect of an Islamic Palestinian state is distinctly distasteful, due to the limited application of *ijtihad*:

Look, there is something called *ijtihad* [individual intellectual exertion to expand and advance the interpretation of the Shari`ah in new situations]. ... It has not been used in a long time and the neglect is killing Islam. ... Why did they stop *ijtihad*? ... We say the Qur’an is *salih li kull al-zaman wa kull al-makan* [true and right for all times and places], but this applies to the soul of religion. What worked for people 1,400 years ago will not work for us today. We should be able to use *ijtihad* to make religion more appropriate for our times. (p. 65)

Mujahida provides an alternative and positive view of Islam’s role in the future Palestinian state. When her brother died during a severe beating at an Israeli checkpoint, she sought solace in the Qur’an:

Slowly, she said, “my entire view on life began to change.” She felt she had more “faith force” (*quwwa imaniyya*) within herself, and she began

to reinterpret her life in Qur'anic terms as a struggle [jihad] for "Muslim Palestine" (*filastin al-muslima*), a struggle to achieve "right" (*al-haqq*) and "justice" (*al-'adl*). (p. 86)

Thus, for her the two concepts juxtaposed; previously a secular-nationalist, her religious awakening produced a basic nationalist outlook combined with a reconfigured Islam.

Case studies feature equally prominently in chapters 4 ("Thawra Camp: A Case Study of Shifting Identities") and 5 ("Karama Camp: Islamist-Secularist Dynamics in the Gaza Strip"), with the methodological decision to conduct research in the West Bank and Gaza proving judicious. Whereas the refugees of Bethlehem reside within a cosmopolitan and urbanized zone with access to Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, Gaza's residents are isolated to a greater degree. Thus, the socio-physical dichotomy between the two groups shows the correlation between divergent cultural and political orientations.

The increasing popularity of Islamist groups in Palestine, Lybarger reasons, must be acknowledged by such powerful outsiders as Israel, the United States, and the neighboring Arab states. The vicious cycle of suicide bombings, home demolitions, and assassinations has yet proved fruitless; to continue merely guarantees another discontented generation that will "forge a new radicalism to overcome the perennial failure of the elders" (p. 245). The book's achievement lies not in its creditable interviews or riveting narrative, though these are a boon; rather, it resides in the ability to convey advice for the future through these mediums. Islamist groups have become an innate element of Palestinian society, and whether they will become a positive or negative force within the peace process depends on the international community's approach toward negotiations for a viable Palestinian state.

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