

GLOBALISATION AND MICRO-NATIONALISMS

Chapter I

WHEN ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM TAKES OVER FROM COMMUNISM

Noam Chomsky writes that the greatest threat to American interests are nationalist regimes sensitive to popular pressure for immediate improvement in the low standard of living of the masses and who promote “diversification of the economy for their own domestic needs. Chomsky quotes a study group that stigmatises the communist threat, which consists of reducing the willingness and ability of poor countries to “complement Western economies”, i.e. to remain part of the Third World¹!

The two Arab republics whose founding principles – Ba'athism – had been national independence were liquidated in two different ways. One, Iraq, was destroyed by the bombing of the Western coalition led by the United States, and seven years later is still suffering a blockade that amounts to genocide; the other, Syria, has simply been absorbed into the imperialist apparatus by allying itself with the United States and Europe in the war that destroyed Iraq. History will tell which of these two countries has the more enviable fate. This dual destiny may also illustrate the failure of Arab nationalism, in that it shows that the rivalries between these regimes for leadership of the Arab world destroy any capacity for the latter to resist the domination of the great powers. The blows dealt by Western imperialism are only as strong as the internal contradictions within the Arab world allow them to be. Conversely, this failure of Arab nationalism may explain the strength of Islamic fundamentalism, whose discourse is universalist in opposition to nationalism.

After the First World War, British imperialism dominated Egypt, Iraq and Palestine. Syria and Lebanon were dominated by the French. In both spheres of influence, movements targeted foreign domination: nationalist and social demands were difficult to separate, insofar as foreign occupation and the

¹ Chomsky, “After the Cold War, the Real War,” in: *Oil and War*; EPO editions.

expulsion of poor peasants following the purchase of the land they cultivated by Jewish organisations led to changes in the relations of production, with the most disadvantaged sections of society bearing the brunt.

"Like all other obstacles to the Zionist project, the land had to be cleared of its indigenous inhabitants, and this was to be achieved through the three commandments of Zionism: redemption of the land, i.e. the purchase of land from absentee owners on condition that the Arab peasants were expelled; conquest of labour, i.e. expelling Arab workers from the labour market, in particular by founding the Histadrut, whose aim was to facilitate the exclusive employment of Jewish labour through boycotts, subsidies and acts of violence; buying Jewish products and boycotting (often destroying) Arab products².

Strikes shook Egypt during the 1920s and 1930s, and repeated uprisings took place in the countryside in Iraq, Syria and Palestine. The general strike by Palestinian Arabs in 1936 had its equivalent in Syria, against the French presence. This general strike was motivated both by opposition to British occupation and the expulsion of more than 20,000 peasant families from their livelihoods. The revolt initially took the form of civil disobedience (refusal to pay taxes), then armed insurrection. In July 1936, martial law was declared and brutal repression ensued. By early 1938, British forces were losing control of events, so they called on Jewish militias, which played an increasing role in repression, mass arrests and executions. In 1939, these Zionist forces numbered 14,000 men organised into ten groups commanded by a British officer and a representative of the Jewish Agency as his deputy.

However, after the Second World War, decolonisation and the formation of states with artificial borders were not the result of the struggle of the Arab masses but of the goodwill of the Western powers. The bourgeoisie and the ruling classes of these new states were content with the situation as it was and adapted perfectly to the division of borders, however artificial it was. There was much talk of "Arab unity", but this remained a pipe dream, as its achievement would have required a long revolutionary struggle against imperialism, and the conservative Arab bourgeoisie feared above all the emergence of the masses on the political scene, the implementation of agrarian reform and, for the Gulf monarchies, the questioning of the distribution of oil revenues. A genuine complicity linked the ruling classes of the Arab countries and those of the industrialised countries, and Israel did the Arab leaders a great service by presenting itself as a common enemy of all Arabs, an enemy that could be pointed to, thus avoiding naming the real enemy, imperialism, against which they did not want to mobilise. To hide their powerlessness, these Arab elites even engaged in frenzied nationalist rhetoric against Israel, aimed at masking the real problems, social demands and class struggle in the Arab countries

² Michel Warschawski, "Etat, nation et nationalisme. – Actualité du sionisme", in *L'Homme et la Société* n° 114, 1994.

themselves. The struggle against Israel strengthened military dictatorships whose only military effectiveness was in fighting their own people. It should be added that the permanent state of war also effectively concealed social antagonisms within Israel itself.

As long as the opposition between the two great blocs lasted, the Arab states played one of the great powers off against the other. With the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the relative balance that this game allowed was no longer possible. Islamic fundamentalism had advantageously replaced communism as a bogeyman to be waved in front of Western public opinion to justify an aggressive international policy. However, the governments and mainstream media were very good at distinguishing between good fundamentalism and bad fundamentalism. When it came to the United States' allies, such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, care was taken not to highlight that these were fundamentalist regimes. The bad fundamentalists were those who refused to bow to the logic of the US administrations' international policy. The Western interpretation of international tensions through a religious lens avoids addressing issues of oppression and exploitation. Thus, support for Israeli policy was justified by the fact that Israel was an effective barrier against fundamentalism, which avoided looking too closely at Israeli policy... which is itself largely dominated by fundamentalist logic.

The fight against nationalism in Third World countries and against communism³, initiated by the United States, was waged on several fronts. In sub-Saharan Africa, the Maghreb, the Near and Middle East, Asia, but also in the Muslim republics of the USSR, the expansion of Islamic fundamentalism, thanks to Saudi and Pakistani capital, was a decisive factor in this policy. In Black Africa and the Maghreb, it is the hegemony of French imperialism that is directly threatened: in this sense, Muslim fundamentalists are playing one imperialism off against another.

Egypt and Sudan are the most striking examples. It was the pro-American regime of Nemeiry that introduced Islamic Sharia law in Sudan, indirectly provoking civil war with the Black, Christian and animist populations in the south. His successor, Hassan Tourabi, did not follow the same path, supporting Iraq during the Gulf War, and was therefore considered a "bad" Islamist. As a

³ Nationalism in the Third World and communism are often confused. This is because "communism" itself (as claimed by the Soviet Union) is only a (barely) disguised form of nationalism. All the communist movements in the Third World that took power, particularly in China and Vietnam, were in fact national liberation movements, nationalist movements. The impact of "communism" on the Third World can only be explained by the fact that it offered prospects for national liberation. The internationalist rhetoric of these organisations was nothing more than a smokescreen to conceal a strictly nationalist agenda and objectives.

result, the Americans now support the Christians, whose massacre they initially encouraged by supporting the fundamentalist regime...

The fall in oil prices, following overproduction by Saudi Arabia, has not only affected the oil-producing countries themselves but also other Arab countries, many of whose nationals worked in the oil monarchies, where jobs are now scarce, a situation that could lead to social unrest from which fundamentalists stand to gain. 300,000 Iraqis and 700,000 Iranians died during the Iran-Iraq war, a war that the Iraqis fought against the (bad) fundamentalist Iranian regime, an enemy of the United States; This did not prevent American and French arms dealers from selling weapons to Iran thanks to the complicity of Israel and Saudi Arabia. *[The Iran-Iraq war opposed these two countries between 22 September 1980 and 20 August 1988.]*

The impact of fundamentalism can be seen in the change in the way facts are viewed. It must be said, however, that this perspective does not only affect Muslim fundamentalists, but also Westerners, because it suits them. The Iranian revolution is a religious revolution. The war in Lebanon is a war between Muslims and Christians. The war in Afghanistan was waged in the name of Islam. In southern Lebanon, which is occupied by Israel, it is a matter of Islamic resistance. The rights of the Palestinians are not national rights but Islamic rights. The Jews' right to Greater Israel is legitimised by the Bible. This is truly a legitimisation of sectarian logic, since political and social conflicts are reduced to a religious dimension. Similarly, the idea that the Arab world is inherently prone to religious conflict is confirmed in the eyes of international public opinion.

One may wonder whether Israel, Saudi Arabia and Iran will eventually form a kind of implicit agreement providing a model based on religious legitimacy to dominate the region.

WHERE DOES THE INTEGRIST DANGER COME FROM?

Arabs feel that Western powers are trying to prevent them from developing and achieving unity. This is why Saddam Hussein's support among Arab populations stemmed not so much from approval of the dictator as from the humiliations they had suffered for decades, ever since the creation of Israel. Indeed, Arabs perceive Israel as a state built on a settlement colony created by the former colonial order, a state determined to destroy any attempt by Arab countries to develop their economies or social systems or to build up their military strength. The United States' relentless refusal to lift the blockade against Iraq is proof of this.

Nassers' dream of building an independent political and economic system and a strong, united Arab nation had failed. The few attempts at "socialism" in Syria, Iraq, South Yemen and Algeria became bogged down in a mixture of

statism, police control and corruption. Realism and liberalism, advocated by El Sadate, then emerged as an alternative. Petrodollars from the oil monarchies were used to encourage political developments towards economic liberalism, as in Egypt, and strengthened conservative Islamist currents. At the same time, some Arab leaders, with the support of the United States, played with fire by using the Muslim Brotherhood in the fight against progressive and secular organisations. But at the same time, the Islamic threat served as a convenient pretext for the Arab ruling powers to prevent any democratic change, an attitude which in turn contributed to accelerating the growth of Islamic movements...

Another factor contributing to the lack of change in Arab countries is the “external enemy” represented by Israel, which has occupied the West Bank, Gaza, Jerusalem, the Golan Heights and the Sinai since 1967; part of Lebanon in 1978; which attacked Iraq in 1981; which invaded Lebanon in 1982, bombed Tunisia in 1985... The formidable apparatus of control and repression that has been built up in the Arab world in connection with this permanent state of war has made it possible to maintain a certain social stability at the cost of blocking any political change. This logic of war has allowed Arab governments to justify their rejection of democracy and to build huge military and population control apparatuses. Thus, 38% of total oil revenues in the 1980s were used to cover military expenditure, compared with 23.8% for development projects. This was a windfall for arms dealers, who profited greatly from the tensions in the Middle East.

Arab governments fear the long-term establishment of the United States in the Arab world. Today, the oil “windfall” is increasingly poorly distributed. Israel remains intransigent on Lebanon and Palestine, despite the “agreements” currently under discussion. *[Please note that this excerpt is taken from a book published in 1998.]* The Syrian dictatorship, now allied with the West, continues to occupy 70% of Lebanon. In 1967 and 1973, OPEC attempted to put pressure on countries that were too favourable to Israel to force it to return the occupied Palestinian, Syrian and Egyptian territories. It was at this time that the United States began preparing and training troops for a landing on the Arabian Peninsula. In 1978, Israel occupied southern Lebanon and refused to withdraw completely.

In 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon and carried out three months of intensive bombing of West Beirut. Arab governments called for economic sanctions against Israel, but their demands were rejected outright. This favourable treatment of Israel by the West has never been denied.

In May 1989, the PLO made a concession and declared Article 17 of the Palestinian Charter null and void, which stated that “the partition of Palestine in 1947 and the creation of Israel are illegal and artificial decisions, regardless of the time that has elapsed, because they were contrary to the will of the Palestinian people and their natural right to their homeland.” Israel did not

budge an inch. On the contrary, the opening of the USSRs' borders to Jewish emigration led to an influx of immigrants, who were forced to remain in Israel because at the same time the borders of the United States were closed to this same emigration. The Israelis hoped to receive two to three million Russian Jews, which would have broken the demographic *status quo*, leaving no hope for the Palestinians. The question then arose as to whether Israel would claim, in the name of historical rights, all Palestinian territory: both banks of the Jordan River (the West Bank and Transjordan), southern Lebanon, already claimed in 1919, and why not Jordan⁴.

The feeling that international law was being applied selectively was already firmly rooted among Arab populations. The Gulf War only confirmed this and discredited any Western claim to provide a political or social model for the peoples of the Third World.

THE FAILURE OF WESTERN MODELS

Islamic fundamentalism did not originally define itself as a movement supporting nationalist demands, which are rightly seen as a Western invention.

If it was wary of the interest shown by Arab nationalist parties in the national cause, and particularly in the struggle against Israel, it was not only because the Palestinian nationalist movement defined itself as secular and because the fundamentalist movements had the material support of the oil monarchies, which were reluctant to challenge the established order. Mistrust of nationalist demands was an essential element of fundamentalism.

Thus, Mohammed Ali Qutb, successor to Sayyid Qutb, the great leader of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood executed under Nasser, declared in 1980:

“Arabs or Muslims who have taken an interest in the Palestinian cause and made it a focus of confrontation with Zionism, imperialism and Western capitalism are short-sighted and have a short memory. They have forgotten that the fall of the Ottoman Empire was the main political objective for the destruction of the The Gateway to the East and (...) the aggression against the Islamic world⁵. ”

The idea underlying this statement is that the Arab independence movements that contributed to the fall of the Ottoman Empire – a Muslim empire – played into the hands of Western aggression against the Islamic world.

After decolonisation, Muslim countries embarked on modernisation programmes inspired by models provided by industrialised countries: the Soviet Union for Nasser's Egypt, Syria and Ba'athist Iraq; capitalist countries for

⁴ See the article by Israeli MP Uri Avneri, “In Israel, Riskless Talk about Jordan”, *International Herald Tribune*, 7 September 1990.

⁵ Zyad Abou Amrou, *The Islamic Movement in the West Bank and Gaza*, Beirut 1989.

Tunisia and Iran. The general failure of these models fostered the Islamist revival of the late 1960s and led to the rejection of Western-style modernisation.

The spectre of Islamism brandished by those in power in both the “North” and the “South” must be reinterpreted through the lens of criticism. In the “South”, the Islamist threat serves as a smokescreen to mask the insurmountable economic and social problems facing Arab countries, which their governments are unable to overcome. In the “North”, it also serves to mask the responsibility of Western powers in the genesis of these problems.

How many “Islamists” imprisoned or dismissed from their jobs are in reality nothing more than trade union activists who have become a little too troublesome? Fundamentalism provides impoverished and anxious populations with clear, ready-made answers to the questions they ask themselves, and presents itself as a miracle cure for society’s ills.

The global nature of fundamentalist discourse attracts those who no longer expect partial solutions⁶.

The goal of fundamentalist movements is to preserve and strengthen patriarchal society and maintain the existing social order. The patriarchal family is the basic unit of society, along with property. A form of egalitarianism is invoked – all men are equal before God – provided they are frugal and detached from material goods. Income is not regulated by institutional means, let alone by challenging the social order, but by the charity that the rich are willing to grant to the poor. This observation obviously applies to *all* forms of fundamentalism.

For Islamic fundamentalism is far from having a monopoly on the patriarchal and authoritarian model of the family. The hierarchy of the sexes is a “natural law” for Catholics. In his Epistle to the Corinthians, Saint Paul declares: “The head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is the man (...) Man was not made from woman, but woman from man; man was not created for woman, but woman for man.” Authority belongs to the husband in the family, and this authority is the model for state authority: “The family is the seat of the first authority, the authority of the father of the family. The state must therefore protect and support family authority.”⁷

⁶ “Islam is a heavenly religion, which exists by itself, autonomous: Sharia law is perfect and lacks nothing that the laws of atheists can add to it. Anyone who claims that Islam is lacking, that it is incapable of solving the problems of the present day, is a liar and an unbeliever, an apostate and an impious person...” Sheikh Abdellatif Ben Ali Al-Soltani, *Mazdakism is the origin of Islam*, Beirut, 1989.... is a liar and an unbeliever, an apostate and an impious person...” Sheikh Abdellatif Ben Ali Al-Soltani, “Mazdakism is the origin of socialism,” quoted in *L’islamisme dans tous ses états*”, Arcantère editions, Mohammed Harbi, coordinator.

⁷ “La fête du Christ-roi”, *Fideliter*, September-October 1988.

Colonial occupation – and in this concept we include the Israeli occupation of Palestine – by its very violence, by stifling national identities, has confirmed and even extended patriarchal and authoritarian values in the sphere of religion and the family, which has contributed greatly to preparing the ground for the introduction of fundamentalism. It is easy to imagine that the defenders of these patriarchal relations are not keen to see a social perspective emerge as an integral part of, or worse, a substitute for the national struggle. By insisting at all costs on religion as the fundamental basis of national struggle and existence, the solution to social problems and in particular the oppression of women, is postponed until after national liberation. It is forgotten that even before the murder of women became commonplace in Algeria, many Palestinian women were murdered by fundamentalists because their actions ran counter to the patriarchal model.

“The height of Western corruption, in the eyes of fundamentalists, is embodied by feminism and the women’s liberation movement, which combine egalitarian and democratic values and apply them to women. Women who are active in these movements are corrupt and licentious. They are renegades who can be killed, along with anyone who supports them.”⁸

Muslim fundamentalists all declare that the application of Islamic principles to women is intended to guarantee their dignity and rights.

Catholic fundamentalists think exactly the same thing. According to them, women “do not want ‘liberation’ [a term always placed in quotation marks], ‘pseudo-emancipation’, which is not due to their actions but to ‘changing customs’, economic changes, the harmful role of writers and artists, legislation, or a conspiracy against the nation”⁹. In other words, women are forced to emancipate themselves, to leave this idyllic situation where life was harmonious and women took care of their families.

To those who advocate gender equality, the Muslim fundamentalist Soltani¹⁰ replies that experience shows “in more than one country that women are incapable of running public affairs”. “Those who have put a woman at their

⁸ Manar Hassan, *Inprécis* no. 366.

⁹ Quoted by Claudie Lesselier, “God, family, country, Catholic “fundamentalists” and women”, in: *Article 31*, no. 1, *Les Théocraties*.

¹⁰ *Mazdakism is at the origin of socialism*. Book by Sheikh Abdellatif ben Ali Al-Soltani, written in 1974 and published in Morocco. Manifesto of the Islamist movement in Algeria.

head will not succeed, says the Prophet. Islam takes into account the character and constitution of women and has assigned them specific tasks. It is by abandoning these tasks and running after those of men that Muslim women have fallen into decadence and Islamic societies into disorder and ruin.

The Catholic fundamentalists also assigns women a role and tasks specific to their “biological destiny”: it is necessary, says Marc Cabantous, “to ensure the fulfilment of women by allowing them to fulfil their biological destiny in the transmission of life and their social destiny in the education of children” (*loc. cit.*). And, just as Sheikh Soltani disapproves of women abandoning their tasks and running “after those of men”, Catholic fundamentalists oppose any questioning of roles and equate womens’ liberation with the feminisation of men and the masculinisation of women: we are witnessing an “attack on the very person of women (...) a considerable transformation of the role of women within society. We are witnessing an extraordinary masculinisation of social life and of women”¹¹.

The charter of Hamas, the Palestinian fundamentalist organisation, states that “the role of Muslim women in the war of liberation is no less important than that of men, for she is a factory for men”. In short, assembly line work... The role of the wife of a Jihad fighter is to “keep the house and raise the children in obedience to religious commands”. These statements apply to all fundamentalist movements, not just Muslim ones. Thus, Dom Gérard, a fundamentalist Catholic, reminds us in a “Letter to Young Mothers”¹² of “the mission of bearing men that has fallen to you (...), an august function to which Saint Paul attaches a redemptive value and which, in my opinion, approaches the greatness of the religious state”¹³. For, he says, motherhood is a priesthood. The same idea is expressed in more contemporary terms by Marc Cabantous, for whom it is necessary to “ensure the fulfilment of women by allowing them to fulfil their biological destiny in the transmission of life and their social destiny in the education of their children”¹⁴.

This quick “comparative overview” of Muslim and Christian fundamentalism shows the hypocrisy of those in the West who demonise the former without ever saying a word about the latter. Admittedly, there is a difference in degree between the enormous weight of religion in fundamentalist Muslim states and the less significant weight of Christian fundamentalism, but it should be emphasised that this difference is negligible.

The Israeli state uses the same propaganda in the demographic war: “Increasing the Jewish birth rate is vital for Israels’ existence, and a Jewish

¹¹ *Permanences*, August 1987, quoted by Claudio Lesselier.

¹² *Itinéraires*, February 1988.

¹³ Quoted by Claudio Lesselier, *loc. cit.*

¹⁴ Quoted by Claudio Lesselier, *loc. cit.*

woman who does not give birth to at least four children is betraying her mission,” declared Ben Gurion¹⁵.

The essentially religious, even mystical, approach of the Israeli occupation, justifying the colonisation of the West Bank, serves primarily as a legitimising doctrine. Since it is God who wants it and allows it, no obstacle should prevent his will from being carried out, neither international law, nor the rights of a dispossessed population.

USING RELIGION FOR POLITICAL ENDS

The emergence of fundamentalism as a political movement has demonstrated its inability to deal with the concrete problems of the population. The only intervention of fundamentalists, when they control a political or administrative structure, is to make changes that affect the religious sphere or concern the ideological control of the population.

Thus, when King Hussein of Jordan, not wanting to confront the fundamentalists, appointed some of them as ministers in his government, within a year they had made themselves so hated by the population, especially the urban middle classes, that the king had no trouble getting rid of them. They had wanted to ban women from driving, prevent fathers from attending their daughters' graduation ceremonies, etc.¹⁶. In two Arab municipalities in Israel, Um al-Fahm and Kafr Qassem, fundamentalists won the 1988 elections. They were so successful that in the following elections, in 1992, these Islamic strongholds were the only places where the Communist Party increased its share of the vote, by 75% and 64% respectively...

Theocracy is not part of the Islamic tradition: it is practised only within extremist sects. It is said that Sunni Islam, unlike Shiite Islam, has (theoretically) no clergy, no church, no institution “authorised” to speak and act on behalf of Islam. (However, observing Iranian society, such a claim is not convincing.)

Fundamentalist theorists such as Abdesselam Yassine, Rachid Ghannouchi and Rachid Benaïssa do not engage in fundamental exegesis: “their information seems more ideological than canonical,” says Jacques Berque.¹⁷ These authors are of more interest to political scientists in the West than to Orientalists:

¹⁵ Quoted by Simona Sharoni, “Sexe, occupation militaire et violence contre les femmes”, *L'Homme et la Société*, no. 114.

¹⁶ Manar Hassan, “Femmes et intégrisme” (Women and fundamentalism), *Inprecor* no. 366, February 1993.

¹⁷ Jacques Berque (1910–1995) was a French sociologist, anthropologist, and Orientalist, unanimously recognised in France as a specialist in the language and social history of contemporary Islam. He was the author of numerous translations, particularly appreciated for their quality of style, including that of the Quran.

Islamism is in fact a movement that uses religion for political ends. In this respect, Islam is no different from any other religion: texts are used to justify politics. King Fahds' appeal to foreign troops in 1990 was condemned by some and justified by others, all referring to the same texts.

“Experience has shown that, in the Islamic world, any democratisation *ipso facto* liberates political and religious movements that seek to destroy it. The neutralisation of these currents by force in turn leads to the halting of the democratic process, which traps Muslim society in the fatalism of repression. It can only escape this fatalism if Islam is ‘depoliticised’, i.e. if it is not used as a political tool in the competition for power.”¹⁸

The Muslim Brotherhood was sponsored by the Arab regimes most opposed to Nasser: Jordan and Saudi Arabia. In Jordan, King Abdullah considered the Brotherhood to be an “attractive movement for young people” that helped “curb the spread of communism”¹⁹. Thus, the influence of Nasserism and, more generally, of Arab nationalism on those hostile to Israel and the West pushed the Muslim Brotherhood into the opposing camp. A Palestinian Brotherhood leader living in Bahrain in the 1950s wrote that “the Brotherhood found itself isolated, accused and persecuted because of its hostility to Nasser. It soon turned against the popular movement, which automatically brought it into the government camp”²⁰.

The evolution of Palestinian fundamentalism provides a characteristic example of gradual involvement in political struggle.

The Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood declined in the 1950s and 1960s and for most of the 1970s due to two events: the founding of Fatah in 1958 and the bloody repression of the Palestinians by Hussein of Jordan in 1970. The Muslim Brotherhood supported the King of Jordan against the communist, Ba'athist, Arab nationalist and Nasserist forces. During the massacre of Palestinians by Jordanian forces (Black September, 1970), the Muslim Brotherhood supported the Hashemite throne.

¹⁸ “Algérie : le dérapage” (Algeria: the slippery slope), Lahouari Addi, [professor of political sociology at the University of Oran], *Le Monde diplomatique*, February 1992.

¹⁹ Iyad Bergouti, “Les armes et la politique dans les territoires palestiniens occupés” (Arms and politics in the occupied Palestinian territories), Zahra Centre for Studies and Research, Jerusalem, 1990.

²⁰ Abdallah Abou Gaza, *Avec le mouvement islamique dans les pays arabes* (With the Islamic movement in Arab countries), Kuwait, 1986.

When Fatah was founded, a document was presented by Khalil Al Wazir (Abu Jihad) to the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood, calling for the creation of a parallel organisation to fight Israel: “it will not display Islamic colours in its symbols or (...) its external appearance,” said the document, which called on the Muslim Brotherhood to join the organisation, but also urged them to “get rid of their partisan uniforms and don Palestinian attire”. The organisation “will build bridges between the Brothers and the masses and break the shackles of Nasserite ostracism”.

The first leaders of Fatah were members of the fundamentalist organisation: Abu Jihad, Salim Zaanoun, Salah Khalaf (Abu Iyad), Assaad Saftaoui, and Arafat, which created confusion among the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. The founders of Fatah had to explicitly state that they had severed their ties with the Brotherhood. At the time, in the shadow of Nasser, it was impossible to found an organisation to fight against Israel without distancing oneself from ones’ previous affiliation.

The Muslim Brotherhood refused to join Fatah:

“Assuming that the organisation (Fatah) can develop and attract many members and supporters, this popular support will not be for the Brotherhood and Islam, but for the idea of the liberation of Palestine. The recommended solution was that ‘the Brothers should redouble their efforts to spread their doctrine and enhance the image of their movement, for it is this movement which, when it triumphs, (...) will liberate Palestine’.”²¹

When the struggle against Israel was led by Nasser and his movement, the Muslim Brotherhood refused to participate. The decline of Nasserism prompted them to take up the banner of liberation in turn. The resurgence of fundamentalism from 1970 onwards was a direct consequence of Nasserisms’ failure to bring about an Arab awakening. Fundamentalism took up the unresolved issues in the Arab world, but in Palestine it failed to gain traction. Hamas was not founded until 1987 and waited until August 1988 to publish its manifesto.

The PLO had accumulated all kinds of failures that had led it to stray from the political and military objectives that had guided its foundation. It made a shift towards a political settlement at a time when the context offered no guarantees. While the PLO leadership moved towards a diplomatic solution to the conflict, a religious resistance movement developed in Lebanon under Israeli occupation, beginning in 1983, which took on a very aggressive, even suicidal

²¹ Abdallah Abu Gaza, *op. cit.*

character. This resistance, which had a major impact and targeted the Israeli occupation forces and the Multinational Force, gave impetus to the fundamentalist movement in Palestine.

The failure of Palestinian nationalism had created a vacuum that the Muslim Brotherhood quickly filled: when secular, nationalist, socialist and liberal ideologies failed, fundamentalism remained. This is expressed in a Muslim Brotherhood pamphlet distributed in the West Bank and Gaza: “The movements that have demonstrated their failure over the past 20 years on the Palestinian scene can no longer claim a monopoly on Palestinian action.”²²

The Intifada, which was a spontaneous revolt born of political and social despair, in fact marks the failure of the PLO, but it also provokes the “Palestinisation” of the Muslim Brotherhood, which nevertheless had a discourse encompassing the entire Ummah, the Muslim community. Gradually, Palestinian-centrism became a frame of reference for fundamentalists in their understanding of problems and their conception of action. Without this adaptation, the Muslim Brotherhood would not have been able to take root, despite its institutional activity in social services, libraries and universities. The reaffirmation of religious identity became a form of national identity.

The Hamas charter, published in August 1988, shortly after the start of the Intifada, declared its opposition to any peaceful initiative or solution to the Palestinian question, as well as to all international conferences, which cannot meet the demands or restore the historical rights of the Palestinians: International conferences and other initiatives are nothing but a “waste of time,” says the charter: “There is no solution to the problem of Palestine except through jihad.” “The messenger of Allah [*Muhammad*] has already spoken of the time when Muslims will fight the Jews and kill them...” It should be noted that while Muslim fundamentalists deny any legitimacy to international agreements, their Jewish counterparts think exactly the same. Such a “political” shift in the Islamist movement is remarkable, given that the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, which is more “orthodox”, so to speak, does not question the PLO or Arafat.

Patriotism is becoming part of Hamas’ religious doctrine, whereas Sayyid Qutb rejected the question of national identity and considered it blasphemy belonging to the ideology of *Jahiliyya* (the period of pre-Islamic “paganism”).

Thus, Islamic fundamentalism in the Arab-Muslim world has become a genuine political movement whose distinctive feature is simply that it uses a religious framework to interpret the world and the Other.

“The ultimate goal of Islamism is explicitly political,” says Mohammed Harbi: “It can be analysed as an ideology generated by the process of modernisation and secularisation, rather than being solely rooted in religious

²² See *The Islamic Movement in the West Bank and Gaza*, op. cit.

logic.”²³ However, Mohammed Harbi warns us against arbitrarily lumping all forms of Islamism together and turning them into actors in an orchestrated conspiracy.

WHEN ISRAEL FAVOURS HAMAS

Virtually non-existent ten years ago among a population that was highly educated and largely immune to Islamist rhetoric, before the Israeli authorities closed the universities during the Intifada and made normal schooling impossible, the Hamas group grew inexorably over the years with the worsening of the situation of the populations living in the occupied territories, with the increase in the destruction of houses, land and house confiscations, and the uprooting of olive and fruit trees, with no prospect of a negotiated political solution in the face of an Israeli government that was clearly seeking to gain time to bring in as many immigrants from the former USSR as possible and accelerate the settlement of colonists in the occupied territories.

The existence of an Islamist movement, which all impartial observers, including those in Israel itself, recognise as having been largely fostered by Israeli policy, plays right into the hands of the occupying power. Indeed, no one could be unaware that the political options of the various parties making up the PLO were secular, or at least multi-confessional, which the Israeli state is not, far from it.²⁴

The radicalisation of the Palestinians is a direct consequence of the occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip for 30 years, which has resulted in the confiscation of more than half of the 5,850 km² of land to which they were entitled under international law.

²³ Mohammed Harbi, *L'islamisme dans tous ses Etats* (Islamism in all its forms), éd. Arcantère, p. 3. Mohammed Harbi, born in 1933, is a former senior civil servant, historian and academic from Algeria, specialising in the political life and history of Algeria, and a former member of the FLN. Mohammed Harbi is the author of numerous reference works on the history of the Algerian revolution. He is a member of the steering committee of the Russell Tribunal on Palestine, whose work began on 4 March 2009.

In February 1953, he presented the Algerian question to the Lenin Circle and met Daniel Guérin, who introduced him to the revolutionary anarchist and Luxemburgist pamphlets published by Éditions Spartacus.

See: <https://maitron.fr/harbi-mohammed/>, entry on HARBI Mohammed.

²⁴ For the record, civil marriage does not exist in Israel. Marriage is a religious monopoly. Rather than introducing civil marriage, the government has just decided to subsidise couples who go abroad to get married civilly, a situation that is of particular interest to non-religious couples and those in which one partner is not Jewish.

While the PLO renounced terrorism in 1988 and 1989 and recognised the State of Israel (Resolutions 242 [²⁵] and 338), Hamas demanded the return of all territories occupied by Jews since the founding of the State of Israel in 1948. There is undoubtedly a correlation between the dates of Arafats' concessions and the publication of the Hamas charter in August 1988, in which the fundamentalist movement declared that it would work to "raise the banner of Allah over every inch of Palestinian soil" and that "the establishment of the Islamic State will be proclaimed from its mosques".

One may wonder why Arafat made this fantastic unilateral concession of recognition to Israel, *without obtaining anything in return*, at a time when a "low-intensity" popular uprising was taking place in the occupied territories that was swinging international public opinion in favour of the Palestinians.

In any showdown that could lead to negotiations, it is important to determine what the opponent wants most and give them as little of it as possible, which is only achievable when you have the most cards up your sleeve. Arafat had a formidable asset, *which he refused to use*: the Intifada (which he did not control, it is true. And from the outset, he gave his opponent what he wanted most: recognition. From then on, *the PLO was no longer of any interest to Israel*: it was a movement without substance, no longer an adversary, insofar as it was an adversary that had nothing left to give and nothing left to oppose.

If we disregard Arafats' simple error of judgement, we can only conclude that the Intifada *posed a greater danger than the recognition of Israel*. The Intifada could have resulted either in a mass popular uprising or in the independence movement being taken over by men who had escaped the control of the PLO leadership in exile: political cadres from within the movement, or fundamentalists.

Two fundamentalist Muslim movements emerged in the territories occupied by Israel since 1967: Hamas and Jihad for the Liberation of Palestine. Hamas was initially encouraged by the Israeli authorities as a counterweight to the influence of the PLO. In the 1970s and 1980s, the military authorities repeatedly released militants linked to Hamas, even when they were convinced that they were hiding weapons.

Tolerance towards Hamas was one of the conditions set by the Iranians when they purchased American weapons through Israel as part of Operation Irangate, in which Israeli agents convinced Robert McFarlane to allow Israel to illegally

²⁵ Emile Habibi, a Palestinian intellectual of Israeli nationality, said on this subject that those who reject the historic compromise of two states "have caused so much misery, starting with this: they have caused the Palestinian people to lose twenty-eight years – the years of Israeli occupation and colonisation – by rejecting Security Council Resolution 242 adopted after the aggression of June 1967" [the Six-Day War].

sell weapons to Tehran and divert some of the profits to support the Contras against the Nicaraguan government²⁶.

In May 1989, when fundamentalist influence spread beyond Israeli control, a wave of arrests swept through the Hamas leadership. Nevertheless, it took six months, until September 1989, for Hamas to be declared illegal by the Israeli authorities.

Like the Islamic Jihad for the Liberation of Palestine, which is divided into two factions, Hamas is heavily subsidised by both the Gulf States and Iran. In 1990, Saudi Arabia paid these two organisations \$83 million. Kuwait also gave many millions to these two groups. Pinhas Inbari, in *Al Hamishmar* (20 December 1992), points out that, curiously, Israel targeted Hamas leaders and militants close to Saudi Arabia, but spared those close to Iran, which had set up logistics and training camps to facilitate the actions of Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

Hamas has representatives of its leadership in several Arab and Muslim capitals, in Tehran, Amman and Damascus, who were present in Tunis on 21 December 1992 at the first (official) meeting between Hamas and the PLO as equals.

Hamas made its cooperation with the PLO conditional on the rejection of Resolutions 181²⁷, 242 and 338, adopted in 1947, 1967 and 1973 respectively, and the reconfirmation of the military option; it demanded 40 to 50% of the seats on the Palestinian National Council and required the PLO to declare itself an Islamic organisation. In addition, the PLO had to declare that the Islamic Palestinian land could not be abandoned or divided. Obviously, the “atheist communists” – the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine²⁸ and the Popular Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine²⁹ – had to be expelled. “The day the PLO makes Islam its way of life, we will be its soldiers, we will light its torches. Until that day – and we pray to Allah that it will be soon – Hamass’ attitude towards the PLO is that of a son towards his father...” (Hamas-Palestine Charter, Art. 27 [Title IV].)

The PLO leadership rejected all these conditions but stated that Hamas and the other fundamentalists are “part of the Palestinian people and as such have

²⁶ According to *Israel and Palestine Political Report* No. 178/179, December 1992.

²⁷ U.N. General Assembly Resolution 181 (29 November 1947) decreed the partition of Palestine (67% Arab, 33% Jewish) into a Palestinian state (44% of the territory) and an Israeli state (56% of the territory).

²⁸ A secular Palestinian Marxist-Leninist organisation founded in 1967 by George Habash.

²⁹ Group founded in 1969 by Nayef Hawatmeh, splitting from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

their place under the umbrella of the PLO". Hamas was offered 8% of the seats on the Palestinian National Council.

This is significant because, unlike all other Arab governments, the PLO considers itself a multi-faith entity in which Muslims, Christians and Jews have a place and should be represented. Christians of various denominations make up about 20% of Palestinians (they constitute 13% of Arabs in Israel).³⁰ Only a few Jews officially identify themselves as "Palestinian Jews" and possess PLO identity cards, including Ilan Halevy, PLO representative to the Socialist International and member of the PLO advisory team for peace negotiations.

Other Jewish Palestinians are secret members of the PNC (particularly members of the DFLP and PFLP), but the total number of Jewish PLO activists is probably less than 100. Nevertheless, their existence, along with the much more significant number of Christians, is considered by the PLO leadership as an ideological and political card that could be played only in cases of extreme emergency.

THE ISLAMIST MOVEMENT TURNS AGAINST THOSE WHO PROMOTED IT

The "fundamentalist danger" in the occupied territories has only recently been discovered. The hypocrisy of the negotiations, in which it is always the Palestinians who make concessions without any change in the living conditions of the populations in the occupied territories, fuels the propaganda of Hamas, whose ranks are swelling considerably. The irony of history, as we have seen, is that it is the Israeli authorities themselves who have encouraged the emergence of Muslim fundamentalists.

Ze'ev Schiff and Ehud Ya'ari, two Israeli journalists, write:

"Just as President Sadat had encouraged the emergence of Islamic associations in order to outmanoeuvre the Egyptian left, members of the Israeli general staff wanted to use the fundamentalist upsurge in Gaza to weaken the PLO. Sadat died at the hands of the very pious fanatics he had helped. Gaza suffered a similar fate: the Islamic movement turned against precisely those who had thought it wise to promote it."³¹

³⁰ In 2015, however, they represented between 1.5 and 2.5% of the population of the West Bank and 0.13% in the Gaza Strip. Ten years later, this figure is expected to have fallen significantly. (Note, 2025)

³¹ *L'Intifada*, éd. Stock.

It is difficult to imagine that the millions of dollars poured into Hamas' coffers by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, staunch allies of the United States, could have been done without the approval of the latter and Israel.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Israeli authorities encouraged fundamentalists to take over positions of power in religious institutions, which led to their political development and, as a result, their "Palestinisation". Indeed, Muslim fundamentalists were not originally interested in the Palestinian cause, as nationalist demands did not fall within their traditional sphere of action. Islam sees itself as universalist, and Islamic religious leaders regard national liberation movements as a Western ideological import.

The Israeli authorities thought they could rely on this lack of interest in the Palestinian struggle; they expected a confrontation with the PLO to lead to its collapse. The PLO did indeed suffer a severe blow in the Gaza Strip, but the Israelis eventually realised that the emergence of a fundamentalist force posed a much greater danger. Until then, the Israelis had ignored one aspect of Hamas' programme, namely the destruction of Israel.

However, the rise of fundamentalists was then conveniently exploited by the Israelis, who now had a bogeyman they could use to justify their repressive policies: thus, in the eyes of international opinion, Israel was no longer engaged in a local conflict with a population whose territory it occupied, but was at the forefront of the Western worlds' fight against Islamic fundamentalism...

It is hardly surprising that the negotiations begun in Madrid, which immediately bogged down, were accompanied by a resurgence of armed clashes involving fundamentalists. Armed actions and fundamentalist attacks are not the result of a coherent, long-term strategy, but rather "opportunistic" acts whose only consistency is the state of Palestinian public opinion, which is itself closely dependent on the progress of negotiations.

Several Israeli soldiers were killed in Gaza during clashes with Hamas fundamentalists. On Sunday 13 December 1992, Israeli border guard Sergeant Nissim Toledano was kidnapped. Hamas demanded the release of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the movements' founder, who had been sentenced to life imprisonment by a military court. The Israeli authorities refused, sealed off the occupied territories and imposed a general curfew. The army went on the offensive to recover the soldier, who was found dead the next day. Militants from the Islamist group Hamas claimed responsibility for the assassination. Already, in the first week of December 1992, Hamas had claimed responsibility for the deaths of three Israeli soldiers killed by machine-gun fire, and another soldier killed a few days later.

By encouraging the rise of Islamic fundamentalism among Palestinians, the Israeli government was helping to demonise Palestinians and justify its policies in the eyes of world opinion. The Israeli newspaper *Hadashot* revealed on 15

December 1992 that the Shabak, the Israeli secret service, had produced leaflets signed by Hamas denouncing the PLOs' attitude in the Intifada.³² In 1992, it was estimated that if elections were held in Palestine, Hamas would win 30 per cent of the vote.

The assassination of Sergeant Toledano was followed by the expulsion of 415 Palestinians (on 17 December 1992), who were members or supporters of Hamas, but the *International Herald Tribune* of 18 December 1992 said of them: "It would appear that almost all of those deported are theorists, financiers and leaders of Islamic institutions. In any case, they are not armed bandits." The Israeli authorities attempted to shift the problems they had created onto others – a constant feature of Israeli policy. Rabin suggested: "If a country could take them in for a while until their exile expires, I think that would help solve the problem." The *International Herald Tribune* (31 December 1992), which quotes this statement, specifies that they will be able to "apply to the Israeli authorities to return home in two years' time" ... which, of course, does not guarantee that the Israeli authorities will agree.

The decision to deport them was taken almost unanimously, with only the Minister of Justice abstaining. The Supreme Court upheld this decision by 5 votes to 2 abstentions. The 415 Palestinians, who were handcuffed and blindfolded in buses, were transferred overnight to the Israeli-controlled border in southern Lebanon.

The expulsion of the 415 Palestinians obviously caused unease among the negotiators. Faisal Husseini, a Palestinian leader (and notable figure) from the interior, declared that the Palestinian negotiators would not return to Washington until the deportees had returned. But the "Arab Brothers" who were also participating in the negotiations were less categorical: the Syrians, Jordanians and Egyptians, who have territorial or strategic interests in these negotiations, made it known that they would come. This revealed one of the perverse aspects of these negotiations, which isolate the Palestinians from other Arab states whose support (much more theoretical than real, incidentally) had until then had at least symbolic value. Each state involved in the conflict seeks to extract the maximum benefit from the negotiations, with no regard for the "Palestinian cause".

In April 1993, when the 9th session of the conference opened, the occupied territories were sealed off by the Israeli army following a "wave of attacks against Israelis", according to official statements. The opening of the conference, which was scheduled to begin on 20 April, was postponed for a week. When, on the 26th, the entire Palestinian delegation arrived in Washington despite the failure of the deportees to return, the occupied territories went on a general strike in protest.

³² Yoram Binour, *Hadashot*, 15-12-1992.

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In *L'Occident et la guerre contre les Arabes*³³ (The West and the War Against the Arabs), I wrote: “The most glaring contradiction of Islamic fundamentalism is that its populist rhetoric is based on the support it receives from wealthy oil monarchies opposed to any development in the Arab world, and that its anti-Western positions play perfectly into the hands of American imperialism, which sees Islamism as a means of containing both communism and Arab nationalism.”

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, US international policy consisted of establishing a new logic of war to replace the old one, changing its orientation from East-West to North-South. This logic of war replaced a global conflict with the former communist enemy with a proliferation of local conflicts with the Third World. It also made it possible to ward off the spectre of recession by rushing headlong into military spending, the only area in which the United States remained competitive.

Quoted in “Spéculations d’après-guerre”, *Le Monde* 30 mai 1991

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³³ Éditions L'Harmattan, 1994. The title of the book is an indirect reference to an article published in 1991 in the journal *Hérodote* under the title “L'Occident et la guerre des Arabes” (The West and the Arab War) – a formulation that suggested that the Gulf War was limited to a war between Arabs. That is why I chose a formulation that questioned this thesis. (Note from 2025)