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“Contemporary Islamic Activism and
the Challenge of Peacebuilding”

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Contemporary Islamic activism comprises various initiatives and activities that are based on Islamic values. This paper examines the nexus between Islamic activism and peacemaking in the Middle East and beyond. I will attempt to explain why in some cases these activists have offered legitimation and have been at the forefront of peacebuilding, while in other cases Islamists have opposed peacemaking formulas. I use both conjecture and evidence to argue that Islamic activists have ample reasons to join the peacebuilding camp.

I take a holistic, interdisciplinary approach to analyzing the relationship between contemporary Islamic activism and peacemaking. This means that I take into account the complexity of factors that affect the behavior of Islamic actors. However, it not mean that I believe all factors are equally significant in explaining individual or group behavior or relations between nations. Indeed, political and military power and economic factors often trump cultural variables, whether the actors under examination are religious or not.

Also, I believe a proper cross cultural analysis of the topic requires some reformulation of the dominant view of the relationship between religious actors and

peacemaking. This view either portrays an exaggerated image of the danger of religious activists to world peace or limits their relevance to marginal aspects of the peacebuilding process. Many researchers are preoccupied by considering how religious values can be relevant to socializing pacified or to-be pacified populations into new realities.

This sort of framing is inadequate in explaining the full extent of the relationships explored in this paper. To appreciate this point, consider that Middle Eastern Islamic groups are in key positions of political power in Iraq, Gaza, Sudan, Turkey, and Iran. Islamists have held cabinet or key advisory positions in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Mauritania and Morocco. Moreover, Islamic tendencies represent the main opposition force in the parliaments of Egypt, Jordan, Bahrain, and Yemen. They also represent the bulk of underground opposition in countries where a ban is enforced on political parties or Islamist politics. In many countries where Islamic activism is restricted, Islamic sentiment still influences public decisions. Islamic activism also includes state-sponsored religious institutions and apolitical movements. In Western countries, Islamic activists are the object of conversation about world peace. They are also actors attempting to contribute to peacemaking through scholarship and interfaith dialogue.

Values and Praxis

The Qur'an describes God as *Assalaam* (the peace); believers are enjoined to desire a company with the God of Peace. David Steele, a Christian pastor, an intellectual and peace activist, writes: "In Hebrew, the term shalom (like the Arabic term salaam) conveys a desire for wholeness, fulfillment, completion, unity, and wellbeing, thereby encompassing both

reconciliation and justice.”¹ Islam, as a member of the Abrahamic family of faiths, places value on tranquility, harmony and equity, conditions that lessen the possibility of conflict and war.

In relations among people, the Qur’an prescribes non-aggression (*la udwan*) is the rule. Reconciliation (*sulh*) and forgiveness (*afu*) are important values to restore the state of peace between people whenever it is broken.² Major classical and contemporary Islamic sources do not view warfare as an endless condition.³ If this is an acceptable premise, then it behooves Islamic leaders to imagine what ending hostilities means and what the state of peace looks like whenever there are conditions of war. The Qur’an obliges the believers to accept reconciliation if an adversary shows signs of peaceful inclinations.⁴

Contemporary Islamic activists have been involved in peacebuilding activities in various forms. The latest manifestation of such role took place in Tripoli, Lebanon in October 2008, when Malik Al-Sha’ar, Mufti of Tripoli and North Lebanon, concluded a reconciliation agreement between warring Alawite and Sunni groups whose infighting involved attacks on Lebanese Army units stationed in the city. The efforts of al-Sha’ar did not capture the attention of Western media outlets, but received prominent coverage in the Arab press.⁵

¹ David Steele, “An Introductory Overview to Faith-Based Peacebuilding,” in Mark M. Rogers, Tom Bamat and Julie Ideh, *Pursuing Just Peace: An Overview and Case Studies for Faith-Based Peacebuilders*. Baltimore, MD: Catholic Relief Service, p.5.

² Mohammad Abu-Nimer, “Conflict Resolution in an Islamic Context: Some Conceptual Questions”, *Peace & Change*. Vol. 21, No.1. January 1996, pp. 22-40. Abdul Aziz Said and et al. (eds.) *Peace and Conflict Resolution in Islam: Precept and Practice*. Lanham: University Press of America, 2001.

³ Louay Safi, “*Peace and The Limits Of War: Transcending Classical Conception of Jihad*.” Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2001.

⁴ *Qur’an*, 8:61.

⁵ See for example an interview of al-Sha’ar Ahmad Mansour’s popular program “Bila Hudud” (Without Boundaries), *al-Jazeera*, October 15, 2008.

Internationally, the Turkish Gulen Movement has been active in interfaith dialogue since the 1970s. When Islamic politics in Turkey faced suppression in the late 1990s, the movement's Founder Fethullah Gulen moved to the United States, and has continued his work through the Rumi Forum in Washington, DC, which promotes intercultural understanding.⁶ Mr. Gulen met with world Christian and Jewish leaders through the course of his reaching out with a message of religious understanding.

The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, a non-governmental organization based in Amman, Jordan, brought together 138 prominent Islamic scholars and activists in 2007 to develop a document on global understanding between religions. The initiative took the name *Taalaw ila kalamatin Sawa baynana wa baynakum* (Come to a common word between us) which was abbreviated in the English speaking world to *Common Word*, a Qur'anic exhortation to Muslims to call on Christians and Jews to form a shared living, a just and peaceful world order, on the basis of shared values. This came a year after another open letter to the Pope by 38 Islamic world leaders in 2006 following a controversial speech in which he quoted a medieval text linking Islam and violence.⁷ Responses to *Common Word* came from across the globe. In the United States, over 300 top Christian Protestant leaders and scholars, both evangelical and mainline, including Leith Anderson, president of the National Association of Evangelicals, and others, signed a response entitled *Loving God and the Neighbor Together* published in the *New York Times*.⁸

Such interfaith initiatives may create an atmosphere that would facilitate dealing with thorny conflicts over land and political rights. But on such issues Islamic activists are neither

⁶ Ihsan Yilmaz et al., eds. *Muslim World in Transition: Contributions of the Gulen Movement* (London, UK: Leeds Metropolitan University Press, 2007).

⁷ <http://www.acommonword.com/index.php?page=timeline>, October 17, 2008.

⁸ *Ibid.*, October 20, 2008.

monolithic nor are they motivated solely by religious ideals or the pure quest for peace. Moreover, like other social actors, they usually engage in rhetoric and action in reaction to certain events and/or for the purpose of achieving immediate aims. Evidence shows that an Islam-based worldview may not be correlated to political behavior.

In Sudan, for example, Islamic activists are on both sides of the Darfur conflict. While President Omar al-Bashir's faction holds a hard line position on the negotiations, al-Turabi's wing pushes for settlement with the rebels. Less than a decade earlier these two groups were part of one Islamic party. Clearly religious sentiments do not explain the divergence; political interests do. Al-Turabi faction is believed to have substantial membership in Darfur and would stand to gain should a settlement is reached.

Pursuing different paths in dealing with conflict is not limited to Muslims in the Middle East and North Africa. In Kashmir, the Islamic All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC) seeks a peaceful settlement to the conflict between Muslims and Hindus and between Pakistan and India over the status of Kashmir. Other militant groups accuse APHC of selling out. Instead, they pursue an armed struggle to force Indian troops out of Kashmir. The U.S.-based Kashmiri American Council advocates the rights of Kashmiri Muslims and publicly supports APHC's position on a negotiated peace with India and Pakistan.

Similar patterns of divergence are found in attitudes toward the Israel-Palestine conflict, which has often captured the attention of governments and groups in the region. The Turkish AK Party, which occupies the majority seats in the Turkish Parliament and runs the government, has sponsored indirect peace negotiations between Syria and Israel and engaged in an attempt to mediate between the Palestinians and Israel. Ironically, AK Party, whose leaders are mainly Turkic by ethnicity, stresses the values of peace and justice and has won

political support from the Kurdish community in Turkey. However, AK Party leaders have enforced the policy of their ethnic cohorts in the Turkish military, refusing to negotiate with the Kurdistan Worker's Party, the main rebel group fighting for Kurdish independence in Eastern Turkey.

What explains the variation in the AK Party approach to peace in the region and within its own country is the politics of survival. The party prefers to avoid confrontation with the military elite, which has repeatedly interfered in the political process, often forcing prime ministers to step down. The secular nationalist group of generals has cultivated normalization with Israel but pushed for a tough cultural assimilation drive vis-à-vis the Kurds. The constraints and opportunities implied in such a strategic outlook have had their imprints on AK Party policies.

Clearly groups prioritize their interests and move to avert threats and build on promise. In the U.S., a couple of Shia-owned businesses in Dearborn, Michigan were vandalized following the hanging of Saddam Hussein in 2006. Shia and Sunni leaders spoke jointly against the violence in Detroit and Los Angeles; community-wide tensions were averted. Inspired by the local success, a national coalition formed under the name American Muslim Initiative for Peace in Iraq (AMIPI) to work for peace in Iraq by promoting Shia-Sunni dialogue at home first.⁹ However, AMIPI fizzled out before it gained any serious traction as the Council on American-Islamic Relations, the main driving force behind the initiative, became entangled in its own internal disputes. Clearly, the immediate concerns of any group or community trump optional campaigns organized for the sake of noble causes.

⁹ See a description of the initiative at: <http://www.amipi.org/docs/contacts/Letter%20to%20Senator%20Norm%20Coleman%209-3-07>, October 21, 2008.

In Israel Islamists have gone from being an underground movement to taking part in Israeli politics. Now there are Muslim members of the Knesset. Although Jewish parties exclude Arab politicians from coalition governments, Arabs have recently served as cabinet ministers. The Islamic Movement is active on the rights of Palestinians and the preservation of Muslim religious sites. They have protested the blockade of Gaza and other harsh Israeli measures against the Palestinians in the occupied territories, but they have done so as Israeli citizens seeking policy change.

Arab-Israeli Conflict Resolution

Several key Arab regimes have been pushing away their Islamist opposition from the making and implementation of decisions of war and peace. Their rationale is that such decisions are matters of state sovereignty. But the effect of such logic on the long term chances of regional peace has been the shielding of society in the Arab world from the demands of conflict resolution. Indeed, a coalition of Arab Islamists and secularists resist normalization with Israel. Such activism was developed under conditions of exclusionary politics. Those excluded tend to opt for stifling regimes' initiatives, which is not very different from what is known in the U.S. as the politics of gridlock. One wonders if this opposition would hold should the leading groups become responsible for government decisions.

Developmental challenges are not the only obstacle to conflict resolution in the Middle East. Nor is the obstruction limited to the Arab side. The Israeli opposition that came to power in 1996, the Netanyahu-led Likud, insisted on renegotiating the 1993 Oslo Accord and never agreed to move to final status talks. Israeli leaders blame the Palestinian opposition

Hamas for their decision not to move forward with the negotiations, and repeatedly articulated the view that peace would have been born dead any way because the Arabs were never committed to it in the first place.¹⁰ In short, distrust on both sides is preventing the conclusion of peace negotiations.

Perhaps one way to resuscitate the peace process is to employ some of the lessons learned by peace activists: engage the opposition.¹¹ Stephen Stedman calls opponents to peacemaking spoilers whose behavior could be changed through inducement, socialization or coercion.¹² The second and the third approaches have been tried with the Israelis and the Palestinians, respectively; both have failed thus far. May be it is time to try the first approach, which basically means inclusion.

A more direct approach to Islamists would see them as partners in peacemaking and offer them an ownership of the process.¹³ This might motivate them to go even beyond tactical pragmatism to a position that is open to the idea of mutual recognition. Is it possible in this case that Hamas and other Islamist groups would jump on the peacemaking bandwagon? Contrast the position of Hamas leaders to their Palestinian cohort in Israel. Abdullah Nimr Darwish, Founder of the movement, has publicly embraced a peaceful settlement. He has been invited to Ramadan *iftar* (break-the-fast) events hosted by President Shimon Peres. This Ramadan he called the Israeli president to push for a final settlement

¹⁰ In April 2008, Netanyahu stated that he would not implement any peace agreement that the Kadima government may conclude if comes back to power. *Haaretz*, "Netanyahu: Abbas-Olmert peace deal will be invalid," April 18, 2008, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/976050.html>, May 7, 2008.

¹¹ Myla Leguro, Peace and Reconciliation Program Manager, Catholic Relief Service, Davao City, Philippines, shared this thought on the basis of her work in Mindanao during remarks she delivered at the United States Institute of Peace, October 21, 2008.

¹² Stephen John Stedman calls such actors spoilers "Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes," in Stern, Paul C. and Daniel Druckman, eds. *International Conflict Resolution after the Cold War*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2000, p. 184, http://www.nap.edu/openbook.php?record_id=9897&page=184, October 22, 2008.

¹³ Douglas Johnston, "Religion and Culture: Human Dimensions of Globalization," in Richard L. Kugler and Ellen L. Frost eds., *The Global Century: Globalization and National Security*. Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2001, pp. 665-681.

with the Palestinians, referring to them as having nothing left to give up for the sake of peace.¹⁴ Thus while Darwish chose non-violence in his advocacy for Palestinian rights, Khalid Mish'al, the exiled head of Hamas Political Bureau, considers armed resistance to Israeli occupation as a nationalist and religious obligation.

Hamas took shape during the first intifada, which started in 1987 and remained a largely non-violent grassroots popular resistance for four years. The intifada's non-violent tactics and strategies are well illustrated by the works of Mohammed Abu-Nimer and Mary King.¹⁵ Hamas's militant response to the occupation followed Israel's iron fist policy toward the uprising. But when Israeli leaders began publicly talking about withdrawal from Gaza in 2004, the military wing of Hamas put an end to suicide attacks. The group, which has been in control of Gaza since 2006 has signed a number of cease fire agreements with Israel. These agreements have been brokered by Egypt.

Catalysts and Precedents

The process of engaging the opposition to promote the idea of mutual recognition need not even start with the warring sides. Peace conversations involving Arabs, Muslims and Jews have started in the U.S. These interactions could develop into coalitions across the globe aiming at creating a momentum for a historical compromise. The dialogue initiative between the Islamic Society of North America and the Union for Reformed Judaism in the U.S., which began in 2007, called for active engagement in Middle East peacebuilding.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Jerusalem Post*, September 9, 2008, October 9, 2008

<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1220802297523&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>

¹⁵ Abu-Nimer, Mohammed. *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam: Theory and Practice*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003. Mary Elizabeth King, *A Quiet Revolution: The First Palestinian Intifada and Nonviolent Resistance*. New York, NY: Nations Books, 2007.

¹⁶ See remarks made by Rabbi Eric Yoffie, President of URJ at the annual ISNA convention in August 31, 2007 at <http://urj.org/yoffie/isna/>, May 19, 2008; the speech delivered by Ingrid Mattson, President of ISNA, at URJ's meeting on December 16, 2007 can be accessed at http://blogs.rj.org/biennial/2007/12/part_of_the_dialogue.html#more, May 19, 2008.

This exchange has opened doors for other very worthy initiatives. The United States Institute of Peace (USIP), joined by the Church's Center for Theology and Public Policy, hosted a conference in which prominent leaders of the three Abrahamic faiths had an opportunity to reflect on scriptural sources that have been used to justify both violent and non-violent approaches to conflict. USIP published an illuminating report summarizing the findings of the three groups of scholars and activists, thus furthering the search for common ground toward the path to world peace.¹⁷ The USIP report supported the view expounded by Karen Armstrong stressing that all religions have had actors who have used scripture to justify triumphalist violence against others.

An Islamic vision for peace can be grounded on solid facts regarding relations with Jews. First, Islamists can not deny the significance of the Holy Land to Jews (and Christians for that matter). The Qur'an includes many stories of the Jewish prophets. The varied religious experiences of the early Israelites (*Banu Israel*), including the Jewish exodus from Egypt to Palestine, are part of the religious narrative of Islam.¹⁸ Second, Most Jews in Israel today originate from within the region; they have either been born there or came from other Arab countries. Third, there is a long history of Arab-Jewish coexistence and peaceful cooperation; anti-Jewish and anti-Arab sentiments are products of the contemporary conflict. Fourth, Arabs and Jews believe in the same values governing conduct in conditions of conflict, although both sides have often violated those norms. A recommitment to such values can help deescalate hostilities, which would allow a better chance at finding a peaceful settlement.

¹⁷ Susan Thistlethwaite and Glen Stassen, *Abrahmic Alternatives to War: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives on Just Peacemaking*. Special Report 214, United States Institute of Peace, Washington, DC, October 2008.

¹⁸ See some major stories in *Qur'an*, 2: 26, 40, 47-49, 51—54, 93, 122, 136, 140, 211, 246-252.

Should Islamists agree to join a historical reconciliation process, what principles would they delineate to reach a peace agreement? One can imagine they would insist that a settlement cannot be reached so long as any side insists on self-reference terms. Muslims and Jews uphold the validity of such a premise in the way each community approaches arbitration of disputes. United Nations resolutions on ending the conflict can offer a neutral frame for reaching a peace deal. At the values level, the Golden Rule, which proclaims equal treatment for all, forms the religious basis enshrined in all Abrahamic faiths and major world religions for the strife to build a peaceful world.¹⁹

There are obvious policy implications to the preceding analysis. Peacebuilding cannot progress without engaging the forces and voices that matter on the ground, including Islamic activist groups. If Israeli top officials are talking to them, why should Western governments rule that option out? Engaging Islamists does not require conceding to them anything which they have not earned; it means challenging them to exhibit self confidence and assume a responsible leadership role that is based on Islamic values that are shared by the broad body of Muslims worldwide. If they move in that direction, may be they will become partners in peacemaking after all.

¹⁹ Muzammil Siddiqi, "We Should Build on the Great Values Shared by all Religions," in Mohamed Nimer, *Islamophobia and Anti-Americanism: Causes and Remedies*. Beltsville, Maryland: Amana Publications, 2007, p. 111.