

Abrahamic Conceptualisation and Religious Reconciliation in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

David M. Spence

In the Middle East, the symbiotic nature of religion and politics makes it extremely difficult to examine one without considering the influence of the other. The Holy Land holds immeasurable significance for the three Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.¹ In the last century, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has typically been portrayed as a religious rivalry between Jews and Muslims. While discourse surrounding the conflict cannot avoid the subject of ‘religion’ or ‘religious tension,’ the current strife between Israelis and Palestinians did not stem from theological differences. The origins of both Zionism and Palestinian nationalism are predominantly secular. However, this fact is forgotten when the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is mistakenly reduced to a “religious war.”² Israeli historian Avi Shlaim describes the conflict as “essentially a geopolitical conflict. It is neither a religious conflict nor a cultural struggle; it is two nationalist movements fighting over the same piece of land.”³ In this paper, I examine the role of the three Abrahamic religions in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and how religion is simultaneously part of the problem and part of the solution. While the conflict began as a nationalist contest between two warring factions, I argue that Islam has been weaponised by fundamentalist organisations, such as Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, in their struggle against illegal Israeli occupation. However, religious reconciliation, as represented in efforts to coordinate political and religious dialogue through interfaith movements, may yet hold the key to peace in the Holy Land.

The establishment of an Israeli state in the Holy Land is known to Palestinians as *Al Naqba* or ‘the catastrophe.’ Palestinian responses to

Arab defeats in the Israeli War of Independence (1948) and the Six-Day War (1967) followed the wave of nationalism sweeping the Middle East at the time. As a result, the Palestinian cause was predominantly framed in political, nationalist, and, most importantly, secular contexts.⁴ Palestinians believed that their struggle against the Israeli state would lead to the reclamation of their land and the establishment of a democratic, secular nation.⁵ For several decades following the 1948 War of Independence, the discourse surrounding Israel and Palestine did not describe the conflict as an inexorable struggle between Islam and Judaism. It was only after the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt that the fundamentalist Islamic movement began to frame the conflict in religious terms.⁶

Florien Wineriter, head of the Humanist Institute in New York City, defines fundamentalism as “the affirmation of religious authority as holistic and absolute, admitting of neither criticism nor reduction; it is expressed through the collective demand that specific creedal and ethical dictates derived from scripture be publicly recognised and legally enforced.”⁷ Wineriter states that Jewish, Christian, and Islamic fundamentalists all believe it is their duty to establish earthly theocracies to usher in the arrival of their Messiah. In order to encourage individuals to live according to their moral principles, Abrahamic fundamentalists use political influence to enforce their beliefs through secular law and government regulations.⁸

Since the 1980s, attempts to establish a grassroots Muslim society in traditional Palestine have been spearheaded by the Hamas, an Islamic fundamentalist organisation guided by its founder Sheikh Ahmed Yasin.⁹ Hamas gained enormous popularity in Palestine by establishing social welfare programs, which involved building hospitals, rehabilitation centres, and sports facilities, as well as hosting youth clubs and Qur’an classes.¹⁰ As they gained popularity for their charity network, Hamas began framing the Palestinian struggle in religious terms, decrying what they perceived as the loss of Islamic values in Palestine. They argued that Palestinians were being dominated by Israel because of their neglect of Islam and thought that “Palestinians would only shake off Israeli rule when they return to Islam.”¹¹ Simultaneously, the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, Islamic Jihad, emerged as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood and were determined to destroy the Israeli state and establish an Islamic Palestine.¹² Islamic Jihad was primarily concerned with

pursuing armed struggle against Israel, claiming, “Palestine is a *waqf* (religious endowment) land. It is a *sharia* (Islamic judicial system) ruling that any land acquired by the Muslims by force is proclaimed Islamic endowment for the Muslims. It is an eternal Islamic heritage.”¹³ They claimed that Muslims have exclusive right to the Holy Land, and both Hamas and Islamic Jihad defined their struggle as being in accordance with the future of the entire *ummah* (global community of Muslims).

Historically, Hamas conceived of this struggle as a direct conflict between Muslims and Jews in the name of God. As the 1988 Hamas Charter states:

our battle with the Jews is long and dangerous, requiring all dedicated efforts. It is a phase which must be followed by [...] battalion after battalion of the divided Arab and Islamic world until the enemy is overcome, and the victory of Allah descends.¹⁴

Hamas further outlines its objectives as “fighting against the false, defeating it and vanquishing it so that justice [can] prevail, homelands be retrieved and from its mosques would the voice of the *mu’azen* emerge declaring the establishment of the state of Islam.”¹⁵ Today, Hamas continues to paint the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a religious one and believes that *jihad* must play a role in resolving it. They understand *jihad* as a call to defend Islamic territory and the *ummah* by whatever means necessary rather than an ‘outer struggle’ to spread the word of God. As stated in the Hamas Charter:

Jihad is not confined to the carrying of arms and the confrontation of the enemy. The effective word, the good article, the useful book, support and solidarity—together with the presence of sincere purpose for the hoisting of Allah’s banner higher and higher—all these are elements of the *jihad* for Allah’s sake.¹⁶

Hamas believes that *jihad* is both the obligation of every Muslim and the means through which Palestinian victory will be achieved. The organisation considers the “initiatives and peaceful solutions [offered by] international conferences, [to be] in contradiction to its principles, a waste of time, and vain endeavors.”¹⁷

Hamas worked diligently throughout the 1980s to combine the Palestinian nationalist movement with the theme of religious liberation, proclaiming the following:

abusing any part of Palestine is abuse directed against part of religion. Nationalism of the Islamic Resistance Movement is part of its religion. Hamas does not consider [peace] conferences capable of realizing the demands, restoring the rights or doing justice to the oppressed. These conferences are only ways of setting the infidels in the land of the Muslims as arbitrators.¹⁸

Hamas appeals to all Arab people and the *ummah* to support the Palestinian cause, imploring “the Arab countries surrounding Israel” to “open their borders for the *Mujahidin* (those engaged in *jihad*) of the Arab and Islamic countries, so they can take their role and join their efforts with the Muslim brothers of Palestine.”¹⁹ Despite their calls for jihadist liberation of Palestine, the Hamas Charter predicts a “constant struggle till the Day of Judgment” in the Holy Land.²⁰

Over the years, Hamas has evolved into a notably pragmatic institution. The revised 2017 Hamas Charter states:

Hamas affirms that its conflict is with the Zionist project, and not with the Jews because of their religion. Hamas does not wage a struggle against the Jews because they are Jewish but wages a struggle against the Zionists who occupy Palestine.²¹

Additionally, Hamas has shifted significantly from their ‘river to sea’ claim over Palestinian territory in the 1988 Charter to a more amenable position. The 2017 Charter proclaims:

without compromising its rejection of the Zionist entity and without relinquishing any Palestinian rights, Hamas considers the establishment of a fully sovereign and independent Palestinian state, with Jerusalem as its capital along the lines of the 4th of June 1967, with the return of the refugees and the displaced to their homes from which they were expelled, to be a formula of national consensus.²²

Evidently, Hamas recognises the geopolitical realities of illegal Israeli expansion into the West Bank and is prepared to negotiate for their rights.

To this end, even as Hamas seeks “an independent state in Palestine governed in accordance with Islam,” spokespersons within the organisation insist that it “is not engaged in a war against Jews or Christians as such.”²³ The organisation emphasises that Muslims have long lived side-by-side with Jews and Christians, in Palestine and elsewhere. Moreover,

Hamas asserts that it is “the Jews [who turned] the conflict into a religious one” by “[making] their religion their nation and their state.”²⁴ As Hamas states:

our message to the Israelis is this: we do not fight you because you belong to a certain faith or culture. Jews have lived in the Muslim world for 13 centuries in peace and harmony; they are in our religion ‘the People of the Book’ who have a Covenant from God and His Messenger Muhammad (peace be upon him) to be respected and protected. Our conflict with you is not religious but political.²⁵

Hamas considers Palestinian Christians to be allies in their struggle against Israeli occupation. As such, “they are an inseparable part of the Palestinian people with full rights and full responsibilities.”²⁶

Additionally, Hamas has grown more selective with its allies, solidifying a strong relationship with the predominantly Shia Islamic Republic of Iran while distancing itself from Sunni extremist movements such as Al-Qaeda. This may be an attempt to gain legitimacy on the international stage, as Hamas is currently considered a terrorist organisation by most Western powers. While the organisation has de facto jurisdiction over the Gaza Strip, they also exploit divisions within the Palestinian population to draw support from various societal factions. Members of their base range from religious Palestinians to “protest voters” who are disenchanted by Fatah’s ineffectual leadership in the West Bank.²⁷

Whether Hamas is characterised as a ‘religious’ or ‘nationalist’ organisation, it is clear that the Zionist community is not comforted by Hamas’ recent overtures toward Judaism. Andrew M. Wender of the University of Victoria argues that, at an existential level, both Zionists and Palestinians in Israel and Palestine live in an environment of “mutual exclusion and ethno-nationalist division” in which physical security is a preeminent concern.²⁸ While acknowledging the divisive role played by competing nationalisms in Israel and Palestine over the past century, Wender believes that religious reconciliation in the Holy Land may yet offer a solution to the ongoing conflict. Accordingly, he suggests moving away from secular or nationalist discourses toward a conversation about the commonalities of the three Abrahamic religions. The Holy Land is the birthplace of both Judaism and Christianity, it retains immeasurable significance for both religions, and the city of Jerusalem is home to the *Al Aqsa* mosque, the third holiest site in Islam. It is vital

to establish unity among these three faiths, which share both theological and geographic parallels. These foundational elements of identity and faith continue to persevere in Israel and Palestine and have the potential to initiate societal and religious healing.²⁹

In his book, *Contending Visions of the Middle East*, Zachary Lockman writes about the 'Abrahamic concept,' a term that describes Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as three religions worshipping one God in Israel and Palestine. He notes a daunting obstacle in the process of cultivating the 'Abrahamic concept,' namely the Orientalist association between 'Judeo-Christian civilization' and 'the West.' This harmful and erroneous characterisation, although convenient for the colonial narrative, portrays Judaism, and by extension Israel, as standing in opposition to Islam.³⁰ The theological, cultural, and political implications of this depiction have led the Western world, Israel included, to view the Palestinians as an irreconcilable enemy driven by a divine mandate.

Ironically, Judaism and Islam share the most theological common ground among the Abrahamic faiths. Both Islam and Judaism subscribe solely to a 'transcendent Divinity' and believe in divinely mandated social, personal, and legal regulations for humanity.³¹ Christianity, on the other hand, expounds on the physical body of Jesus. From Islam's twelfth-century establishment as a political and religious institution up to the present, Islam has thrived alongside Judaism in the Middle East. Legal experts Jacob Neusner and Tamara Sonn elaborate on the judicial and theological similarities between the two faiths. They emphasise that both faith traditions are monotheistic religions of law that worship the same God and both religions are based on a revelatory demand to establish a society in accordance with God's will through divine jurisprudence.³² Additionally, Neusner and Sonn stress the potentially positive outcomes for an Abrahamic conceptualisation regarding religious reconciliation in Israel and Palestine. They express their hope that "the historical interchange between the two religions, which bear so much in common, may renew itself" upon the establishment of a lasting peace in the Holy Land.³³

In his 2002 book, *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East*, Marc Gopin examines the possibilities of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict based on Abrahamic conceptualisation. He suggests using presentations in Palestinian classrooms and Israeli military checkpoints to emphasise the message of compassion and

care for one's enemies, along with holding repentance ceremonies in sacred spaces.³⁴ Additionally, Gopin makes several valuable observations regarding the interconnectedness of the Abrahamic religions and how opposing Israeli and Palestinian identities could be reconciled through "psychic and moral transformation in various Abrahamic traditions."³⁵ Gopin believes that a spiritual transformation based on Abrahamic conceptualisation could foster the development of a pluralistic community with multiple positive identities. These shared identities could promote interconnectivity in the Holy Land. They include, but are not limited to: a Palestinian, an Israeli, a Muslim, a Jew, an Arab, a Christian, a citizen, an activist, a child of Abraham, a child of God, and a human being.³⁶

Regardless of the beliefs set of a secular Israeli or Palestinian, the religious identities and traditions of their communities contribute significantly to their collective identity.³⁷ The impact and influence of religion are especially prominent in times of cross-cultural exchange, even though the majority of the population is no longer subject to institutional religious authority.³⁸ While Gopin's suggests the use of Abrahamic conceptualisation to overcome nationalist divisions in Israel and Palestine is valuable, his ideas will struggle to gain traction without effective political dialogue. Future proposals encouraging shared sovereignty over the Holy Land could utilise Abrahamic interconnectedness as a political framework to encourage the viability of sovereignty. According to Gopin, examples to guide this political solution include: (1) the establishment of a truth and reconciliation commission, in the mould of South Africa, but specific to the cultures and religions of the Holy Land; (2) the implementation of international jurisdiction for the Old City of Jerusalem, whose sovereignty will be governed by a council that guarantees access to the Holy sites for all three religions; (3) the development of an institution responsible for the equitable distribution of the region's natural resources, directed by Abrahamic principles and humanity's responsibility to maintain a sustainable and sacred environment; and (4) the creation of an advisory body, headed by representatives of the three Abrahamic religions, which is to be responsible for the development and institution of diplomatic and public education programs. These programs can foster mutual understanding between broader society and religious communities on the basis of interreligious dialogue and can emphasise the Abrahamic tenets of confession,

forgiveness, empathy, and repentance.³⁹

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is perhaps the most fertile environment for the practical application of religious reconciliation based on an Abrahamic conceptualisation. W.C. Smith suggested an alternative to the strict two-state or one-state solution. In his 1997 book, *Modern Culture from a Comparative Perspective*, Smith proposed a religious reconciliation in the Holy Land based on shared commonalities that transcend nationalism. He suggested that this vision could be realised by Palestinians mutually recognising Israelis.⁴⁰ Similar to Gopin's suggestion to foster a shared Israeli/Palestinian identity, Smith promotes the adoption of a humanist perception of the world in which some people are Jewish, some are Christian, some are Muslim, some are devout, and some are skeptics.⁴¹ This perspective also promotes an inherent respect of one another as human beings.

Though these concepts may sound purely theoretical in nature, they have already been applied at the grassroots level. In January 2002, more than a dozen senior representatives of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities of the Holy Land met in Alexandria, Egypt at the first Middle East Interfaith Summit. This began what is now known as the Alexandria Process.⁴² The six bishops, five sheikhs, and six rabbis who attended the summit pledged to work toward peaceful reconciliation in the region by fostering interreligious dialogue. At the end of their meeting, the delegates signed an unprecedented joint declaration: the First Declaration of Alexandria of the Religious Leaders of the Holy Land. The agreement committed these representatives to use their moral and religious authority to work toward ending violence and resuming the peace process in Israel and Palestine.⁴³

The Alexandria Declaration is founded on the belief that the Abrahamic faith communities must cease their misrepresentation of each other and oppose racism, hatred, and violence in the Holy Land.⁴⁴ It has seven objectives. (1) In order to acknowledge the significance of the Holy Land for all three Abrahamic religions, the followers of the faiths must respect its sacredness. For the integrity of the holy sites to be protected, freedom of religion must be guaranteed for Jews, Christians, and Muslims. (2) Both Israelis and Palestinians must respect the will of the Creator, who has decreed that they may both occupy the Holy Land. (3) It is the responsibility of our political leaders to strive for a just and lasting resolution in the spirit of God and the prophets. (4) A

religiously sanctioned cease-fire must be implemented, observed, and respected by all sides. (5) Future generations must be educated in an atmosphere of mutual trust, respect, and co-existence. Demonisation and incitement of one faith community by another cannot be tolerated. (6) For the common good of all our peoples, we call for the joint pursuit of peace and reconciliation in Jerusalem and the Holy Land. (7) We announce the establishment of a Permanent Committee for the Implementation of the Alexandria Declaration (PCIAD) to engage with our respective political leaders and implement the recommendations of this Declaration.⁴⁵

Two years after the first Middle East Interfaith Summit in May 2004, the Alexandria Declaration was formally discussed by the Arab League. The conversations continued to revolve around the goal of fostering interreligious dialogue to complement the political components of the Middle East peace process. For the most part, the Arab League's issue with the Alexandria Declaration stemmed from the lack of consensus in the Palestinian community, which continues to exhibit discord and infighting. The Arab League also views the death of Yasser Arafat—the former Chairman of the Palestinian Liberation Organization and President of the Palestinian National Authority—as a significant obstacle to political and religious reform, since his death has resulted in a lack of a strong, unified Palestinian voice.⁴⁶ Fifteen years later, the main result of the Alexandria Process has been an increased understanding at the grassroots level of the complex religious dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Moreover, the PCIAD assisted in the establishment of an environment for productive dialogue between the three Abrahamic faith communities.

Despite Palestinian infighting, a Christian movement, known as Kairos Palestine, has emerged out of Bethlehem. The organisation is devoted to ending the illegal Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories; in 2009, they issued a document entitled *A Moment of Truth*, which called on Christians around the world to help accomplish this goal.⁴⁷ Recognising that religion has historically played a negative role in the Holy Land, the Kairos document makes several affirmations: Firstly, although *Moment for Truth* is a Palestinian document, it was produced by representatives from all three of the Abrahamic religions. Accordingly, it advocates for justice, security and peace for all inhabitants of the Holy Land. Secondly, Kairos affirms that the entire Bible,

including the Torah and the Qur'an, is the word of God. Next, considering the issue of 'other' in the Holy Land, Kairos maintains that we are all brothers or sisters created in the image of God and that every human being is worthy of dignity. Lastly, The Holy Land is God's land. Its inhabitants are its stewards, and it cannot be exclusive to any particular faith community. Kairos implores Jews, Christians, and Muslims to find a way to share this unique region. Promoters of the *Moment for Truth* document and the Kairos movement subscribe to a vision of peace, dignity, and justice. This begins with Palestinians and extends to all inhabitants of the Holy Land.⁴⁸

The significance of the Holy Land for the three Abrahamic religions is undeniable. While the Israeli-Palestinian conflict did not unfold as a result of theological differences, it has taken on a significant religious dimension.⁴⁹ Islamic fundamentalist organisations, such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, have weaponised theology for their cause by exploiting both the absence of legitimate Palestinian leadership and the poverty and hopelessness of the community.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, Hamas has developed a pragmatic approach to resolving the conflict, despite framing their ongoing *jihad* as a manifestation of divine will. Following Wender, Gopin, Neusner, and Sonn, I have outlined how an Abrahamic conceptualisation of the interconnectedness of the three Abrahamic religions offers potential solutions to the conflict. These sentiments are echoed and embraced by interfaith movements such as the Alexandria Process and Kairos Palestine as they work toward lasting peace for all involved. Although there appears to be no end to the struggle for the territory between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River in sight, religious reconciliation is essential to establish enduring peace between Israel and Palestine.

NOTES

1. The 'Holy Land' is a term that refers to an area located roughly between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River and includes the Eastern Bank of the Jordan River. Traditionally, the Holy Land is synonymous with both the region of Palestine and the Biblical land of Israel. In the modern era, the term refers to an area that encompasses the modern State of Israel and the Palestinian territories, in addition to parts of southwest Syria, Southern Lebanon, and western Jordan. The land is considered holy by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam alike; much of its religious significance is owed to its status as the home of Jerusalem, Jesus' ministry, and The Night Journey event in Islam.

2. Karen Armstrong, "Think Again: God," *Foreign Policy* 175 (2009): 56, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/10/15/think-again-god/>.

3. Avi Shlaim, "Interview: Israeli new historian Avi Shlaim," *Middle East Policy* 16 (2009): 103, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/1658443.stm.

4. Leila S. Kadi, ed., *Basic Political Documents of the Armed Palestinian Resistance Movement* (Beirut: Palestine Research Centre, 1969), 137–41.

5. Kadi, 137–41.

6. Jamal Khader, "Countering Violence in the name of God in Present-day Palestine/Israel," *Ecumenical Review* 68, no. 1, World Council of Churches (2016): 83, doi:10.1111/erev.12200.

7. Florian Wineriter, Lecture given on 25th March, 2003, New York: Humanist Institute.

8. Wineriter.

9. Matthew Levitt, " Hamas from Cradle to Grave," *Middle East Quarterly* 11, no. 1 (2004): 3–4, <https://www.meforum.org/582/hamas-from-cradle-to-grave>.

10. Levitt, 4–15.

11. Beverley Milton-Edwards, *Islamic Politics in Palestine* (London and New York: I.B. Taurus, 1996), 184–5.

12. BBC News, "Who are Islamic Jihad?," June 9, 2003, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/1658443.stm.

13. Charter of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) of Palestine, Article 11, trans. Muhammad Maqdsi, *Journal of Palestine Studies* 22, no. 4 (1993): 125, doi:10.2307/2538093.

14. Hamas, 123.
15. Hamas, 124.
16. Hamas, 127.
17. Hamas, 126.
18. Hamas, 126.
19. Hamas, 131.
20. Hamas, 125
21. Hamas, "A Document of General Principles and Policies," May 1, 2017, <http://hamas.ps/en/post/678/a-document-of-general-principles-and-policies>.
22. Hamas.
23. Beverly Milton-Edwards and Stephen Farrell, *Hamas: The Islamic Resistance Movement* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), 14.
24. Milton-Edwards and Farrell, 15.
25. Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas: A History from Within* (Northampton: Olive Branch, 2007), 285–6.
26. Tamimi, 283.
27. Milton-Edwards and Farrell, *Hamas*, 13.
28. Andrew M. Wender, "Transcending Nationalist Divides: Religious Reconciliation as the Basis for a One-State Solution in Israel-Palestine," *Digest of Middle East Studies* 20, no. 2 (2011): 267, doi:10.1111/j.1949-3606.2011.00099.x.
29. Wender, 267.
30. Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 219.
31. Wender, "Transcending Nationalist Divides," 268.
32. Jacob Neusner and Tamara Sonn, *Comparing Religions through Law: Judaism and Islam* (London: Routledge, 1999), 3.
33. Neusner and Sonn, 4.
34. Marc Gopin, *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 198.
35. Gopin, 217.
36. Gopin, 218.
37. Wender, "Transcending Nationalist Divides," 270.
38. Wender, 270.
39. Gopin, *Holy War, Holy Peace*, 200–27.
40. W. C. Smith, *Modern Culture from a Comparative Perspective*,

ed. J. W. Burbridge (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997).

41. Smith, 144.

42. Jamal Khader, "Countering Violence in the name of God in Present-day Palestine/Israel," 91.

43. Middle East Interfaith Summit, "The First Alexandria Declaration of the Religious Leaders of the Holy Land," January 21, 2002, <https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFA-Archive/2002/Pages/The%20First%20Alexandria%20Declaration%20of%20the%20Religious.aspx>.

44. Middle East Interfaith Summit.

45. Middle East Interfaith Summit.

46. Khader, "Countering Violence in the name of God," 92.

47. Kairos Palestine, "A Moment of Truth: A Word of Faith, Hope, and Love from the Heart of Palestinian Suffering," accessed December 11, 2018, <http://www.kairospalestine.ps/index.php/about-us/kairos-palestine-document>.

48. Kairos Palestine.

49. Khader, "Countering Violence in the name of God," 85.

50. Khader, 85.