



The writing is on the wall

The Israeli rejection of the Arab peace initiative has contributed to the intensification of Muslim Judeophobia and Jewish Islamophobia

SENIOR ISRAELI security personnel, Israeli and Palestinian political leaders, rabbis and imams have been warning for years that the Jewish-Muslim conflict over the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif could trigger a devastating worldwide religious war.

Few, however, have paid much attention to the underlying processes propelling the parties inexorably toward impending catastrophe: growing Islamic anti-Semitism or Judeophobia in the Arab and Muslim worlds, on the one hand, and accelerated Jewish Islamophobia in Israel and the Diaspora, on the other.

These destructive trends, which feed off each other, have intensified sharply since Israel's capture of East Jerusalem and the Temple Mount in June 1967. Israel's triumphant return to Jerusalem's religious heartland sparked heady euphoria in the Jewish world and deep trauma among Muslims.

A year after Israel's occupation began, hundreds of religious leaders from all over the Muslim world convened at the al-Azhar Center in Cairo to craft a response. In addition to the staple anti-Zionist rhetoric, they unleashed a flurry of vitriolic anti-Semitic slurs. Jews, they declared, were treacherous, conniving monsters who deserved to die.

Secular Arab/Muslim leaders made similar public statements and from time to time called for jihad, or holy war, against the Jews and Israel. The same anti-Semitic tropes appeared in Arab school textbooks and in the media, often based on selective

texts from the Koran or the Hadith prophetic tradition. Christian anti-Semitic writings, including blood libels, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion and classics like the Merchant of Venice were also adduced to buttress the case against the Jews.

The Prime Minister needs to reach an agreement on Jerusalem that takes Muslim sensitivities into account

This murky anti-Semitic wave gathered momentum the more Israeli governments and extremist Jewish groups were perceived as undermining the sanctity of the Haram and the status of East Jerusalem. For example – the annexation of East Jerusalem by the government in 1967 and the Knesset in 1980; persistent Jewish settlement in parts of the city across the 1967 Green Line; the opening of the Western Wall tunnel by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in 1996; Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount in September 2000, which helped to trigger the second intifada.

Parallel to the growing Islamic Judeophobia, radical nationalist and religious messianic trends were developing in Israel, especially among Jews in the national religious movement. The more radical

among them advocate the building of the Third Jewish Temple on the Temple Mount on the ruins of the existing mosques. In the meantime they insist on the right to go up onto the mountain and pray, in violation of Israeli government agreements with the Muslim *waqf*, which administers Muslim holy places, including the Haram.

As it developed, national religious radicalism took on an anti-Muslim and anti-Arab character, partly for ideological reasons, and partly in response to Arab terror and Arab/Muslim anti-Semitism. This created a vicious cycle of mutual religion-based hatred, which came to a head with the abortive attempt by the so-called Jewish Underground, led by Yehuda Etzion, to blow up the Dome of the Rock Mosque on the Temple Mount in 1984.

This type of anti-Muslim radicalism is also the driving force behind more recent attacks on mosques and burning of Korans in the occupied territories and Israel proper by Jewish extremists. Israeli leaders, secular and religious, added fuel to the flames with a string of irresponsible declarations – for example, the late Shas leader Rabbi Ovadia Yosef called Islam “an ugly religion” and an Israeli broadcaster referred to it on air as a “virus.”

In 1996, national religious rabbis exacerbated an already explosive situation when they challenged a longstanding rabbinical ruling forbidding Jews from going up onto the mountain and pray-

ing on its holy ground until the coming of the messiah. Since then thousands of Jews have entered the holy compound and prayed, to the chagrin of the Muslim authorities. In highly publicized acts of deliberate provocation, right-wing Knesset Members have also gone up onto the Temple Mount. In early September, Housing Minister Uri Ariel of the national religious Bayit Yehudi party visited the holy space, declaring that Jews should be allowed to pray there whenever they liked and calling for the building of the Third Temple.

Influenced by radical national religious leaders, dozens of organizations sprang up preparing for the rebuilding of the temple. They produced architectural plans, building materials, priestly vestments and programs for training young priests. According to recent public opinion polls, 30 percent of Jews and 45 percent of religious Jews in Israel support the rebuilding of the temple; 64 percent of Israeli Jews are in favor of Jews being allowed to pray on Temple Mount; and 80 percent support a united Jerusalem under Israel's sole and eternal sovereignty.

Jerusalem as Israel's undivided capital has been the position of most Israeli governments since 1967, which did virtually nothing to counter the growing Islamophobic and anti-Arab trends in Israeli society. Worse, Israeli leaders failed to show corresponding flexibility on Jerusalem after Muslim and Arab governments began to discard anti-Semitic and anti-Israel positions in the late 1970s.

Interestingly in 1978, then prime minister Menachem Begin was leaning toward the establishment of a Muslim "Vatican" on the Temple Mount and in East Jerusalem. But he changed his mind and consolidated the demand for Israeli sovereignty over the entire city.

Nevertheless, on several occasions the



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Arab side offered Israel a way out of the Jerusalem dilemma based on divided sovereignty and agreed arrangements for the holy sites. For years the kings of Jordan, who have special custodial status on the Haram, have made practical proposals. The Egyptians, too, have called for workable compromise. In November 1977, in his speech to the Knesset, then Egyptian president Anwar Sadat offered Israel peace on condition that it agree to Arab/Muslim sovereignty over East Jerusalem and the Haram, excluding the Western Wall. And, in 1979, the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Sheikh Ali Jad al-Haq, published a special *fatwa*, Muslim religious ruling, in this spirit.

Most importantly, in March 2002, all 22 Arab states backed the Saudi peace initiative offering Israel peace, security and normalization of ties on condition that it agree to the establishment of a Palestinian state along the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital. Shortly afterwards, all 35 remaining non-Arab Muslim states added their support. Saudi Arabia and Jordan also initiated a series of religious dialogues with the participation of Jewish clerics.

However, all Israeli governments, with the tacit exception of the Olmert administration in late 2008, never accepted the

Saudi-Arab-Muslim initiative, not even as a basis for negotiation.

Israeli rejection of the Arab initiative has come at a price. It has already contributed to the intensification of Muslim Judeophobia and Jewish Islamophobia, to strains on relations with Jordan and Egypt, to aggravated tension with Palestinians on both sides of the Green Line, to international isolation and to the danger of a Muslim-Jewish religious war.

The writing is on the wall: To prevent escalation of the current wave of religion-motivated terror in Jerusalem, Prime Minister Netanyahu needs to quash false rumors of plans to change the status quo on the Temple Mount. More importantly, on the strategic level, to preempt wider religious conflagration, he needs to move politically to reach an agreement on Jerusalem that takes Muslim sensitivities into account and gives Israel a chance for peace with most of the Muslim world. ■

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