Islamism and nationalism in the Palestinian territories: 'The Palestinian experience'

Donncha Cuttriss

Study of Religions Department, UCC

Introduction

The Palestinian question has remained one of the most continually debated topics in the world today. More than any time in the past a solution to the Palestinian/Israeli conflict seems more distant than ever when Palestinians and Israelis themselves, academics, analysts and peacemakers do not hold much optimism for the future in achieving peace between the Palestinians and the Israelis and a settlement to the issue of Palestinian nationhood. A key factor in the struggle with Israel and in Palestinian efforts to achieve a Palestinian state has been the internal ideological battle between Islamism and Nationalism in defining the Ideological direction of the Palestinian struggle. The Islamist Hamas believes, through what it has formulated as an Islamist nationalist perspective by fusing together Islam and nationalism, that only through Islam can the Palestinians succeed in achieving their rights. Moreover, Hamas considers that the demise of Israel can only be brought about by returning to Islam within Palestinian society. Islamic Jihad similarly believes that liberation of Palestine can only be successful if it is Islamic. Although the religion of Islam does play a significant role in a conservative Palestinian society, Hamas' arch foe Fatah is ideologically a secular organisation. This ideological struggle within the Palestinian territories is represented by the current ideological divide existing in the West Bank governed by the secular Palestinian Authority and in Gaza governed by the Islamist Hamas. Hamas and other Islamist movements have an ideological world view of a Palestinian state which is at odds from that of more secularist and leftist parties such as Fatah. Complicating this picture is the fact that Israel, the EU and the U.S. are key actors in Palestinian politics and ideology demonstrated by their support for Fatah and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and the isolation of Hamas and the blockade in the Gaza Strip. In turn, Hamas is supported by Hizbullah in Lebanon, Syria and Iran, as all actors look to further their interests in the region. This Ideological struggle within the Palestinian territories between Islamist and secular Nationalists forms the basis for my research.

38

Previous Research

There is a significant amount of research published on the Palestinians and Palestinian identity, much of which charts the formation of a Palestinian Identity before and after World War 1. There is also an abundance of research focusing on Islamic politics in the Palestinian territories and on Islamic movements such as Hamas. Very little of this research, however, has concentrated on the reasons why Palestinians support either the Islamist or secular nationalist milieus within the Palestinian territories. However, in recent years, Loren Lybarger has undertaken research focusing on Islamism and secularism in the occupied territories (Lybarger 2007). His research relied on extensive field work in the West Bank and Gaza during the first and second Intifada in 1987 and 2000 and interviews carried out during time spent in both areas. What was different in Lybarger's research was that he gained an insight into the lives of ordinary Palestinians, their experiences and reasons for supporting either Islamist or secular parties, whether Christian or Muslim. One of his conclusions is that "Palestinian society does not fall neatly into two camps, Islamist or secular nationalist" (Lybarger 2007). There have been significant changes in the Palestinian arena since Lybarger's research, including Hamas winning the 2006 parliamentary elections and its takeover of Gaza in 2007. Since then, Gaza has been under blockade and the West Bank and Palestinian Authority have been further supported by Israel, the EU and the U.S. in efforts to isolate Hamas and move forward with the peace process. As evidenced by Hamas' election victory in 2006, Palestinian political loyalties and ideological allegiances have shifted more towards the Islamist perspective over the last decade due to Hamas' ability to capitalise on the failure of the peace process, corruption within Fatah and the Palestinian Authority, and no improvement in the daily lives of the Palestinian people.

Research Questions

What are the reasons then for Palestinians supporting Islamist nationalist groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad or more secular nationalist groups such as Fatah in contemporary Palestinian society? How significant is religion, ideology and politics in Palestinians voting for Islamist or secular parties? How has the prospects/failure of the peace process affected/altered Palestinian allegiance to either the Islamist or secular milieu? How have Israeli actions such as the assassination of Hamas leaders, daily checkpoints, curfews and settlement expansion affected and shifted Palestinian allegiance to the Islamist nationalist camp? These are some of the questions I intend to answer by living and studying amongst Palestinians in the West Bank, Ramallah in 2011. Through carrying out in-depth and focus group interviews with Palestinian activists, students and academics, I will gain a further insight into the 'Palestinian Experience'.

Palestinian Collective Identity

How Palestinians identify themselves is crucial in understanding the choices they make, whether a Muslim or a Christian living in Israel, the West Bank, Gaza or in a refugee camp in Lebanon. Although Palestinian identity emerged during the years before the outbreak of World War 1, Palestinian identity was also formulated in reaction to the decline in pan-Arabism, Zionism and occupation (Khalidi 1998). The Israeli occupation which has been seen as constituting a threat to both the Arab identity of Palestine and its Islamic character has been an important factor in the rise of the Islamic movement (Abu-Amr 1994). Due to the separateness of the Palestinian people from one region to another, their individual experiences and identity have evolved differently, which impacts on the ideological choices they make. Palestinian Muslim youths growing up in Gaza have a somewhat different life experience than a Palestinian Christian living in the more secular city of Ramallah in the West Bank. Gaza today is blockaded by Israel and is governed by the Islamist movement Hamas.

Living conditions, where most Palestinians live in absolute poverty, are significantly worse than in the West Bank which is supported politically and economically by Israel and the West. Moreover, the West Bank is governed by the secular Palestinian Authority where the religion of Islam does not play a role in the politics of the West Bank, unlike in Gaza. In the Palestinian realm, the absence of national state institutions and structures representing all Palestinians living in the Palestinian territories, signified by the current split between Gaza and the West Bank, mean that Palestinian identity continues to evolve along numerous trajectories.

Hamas have an Islamic nationalist vision for Palestinian society which is ideologically at odds with that of the more western secular national Palestinian forces within the PLO. As Hamas became more predominant within Palestinian society, specifically during and after the first Intifada, Palestinian Identity became more Islamised, in what Meir Litvak refers to as "the Islamisation of Palestinian Identity" which led in turn to "the Islamisation of the Palestinian Israeli conflict" (Litvak 1998). Hamas presented a religious and national alternative to the secular PLO leadership by incorporating Palestinian nationalist elements and rhetoric into its Islamic Ideology.

In response, Fatah adopted Islamic symbols and rhetoric into its discourse, as both Hamas and Fatah vied for the support of the Palestinian people. Palestinian secular nationalist and Islamic identities have thus over time become intertwined. The failure of the PLO nationalist peace process and the Oslo Accords in the early 1990's enabled Hamas to capitalize and make further gains in the Islamisation of the Palestinian struggle with Israel. Similarly, Hamas will seek to benefit from what it sees as the inevitable failure of the current peace process in galvanising support for its Religious Nationalist solution to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

Islamist Nationalist or Secular Nationalist

Since the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, there have been three separate and distinct Palestinian movements, with different ideologies, Arab Nationalism, Palestinian Nationalism expressed by Fatah which dominated Palestinian politics in the 50's and 60's, and Palestinian Religious Nationalism which Hamas embodies and has become more dominant in the last few decades (Baumgarten 2005). After the decline in Arab Nationalism, the main struggle in contemporary Palestinian society is between what Lybarger refers to as the 'Islamist milieu' represented by the dominant Hamas and the secular-nationalist milieu represented by Fatah, which is the dominant faction in the Palestinian Liberation Organization (Lybarger 2007). Lybarger discovered that, due to competition and division between the Islamist and secular, activists integrated elements from both the Islamist and secular milieus in reformulating new political identities (ibid). The boundaries between Islamism and secularism in the Palestinian setting have become blurred as both secularists and Islamists use both secular and Islamist symbols to further their agenda in securing the Palestinian vote. Palestinian allegiance to either the secular or Islamist faction can be governed by many factors, including the social and political affects of living in either the West Bank or Gaza. Many Palestinians voted for Hamas in the 2006 elections due to rampant corruption within the Fatah leadership, divisiveness within Fatah and a poor election campaign whereas Hamas were considered to be honest, well organized and united. ADDIN ZOTERO_BIBL Susser argues convincingly that Hamas' victory was also due to a crisis of secularism in the Arab world where Islamist politics is on the rise (Susser 2010). However, despite increased support for Islamist movements such as Hamas, Palestinians have been much less committed to Hamas' ideology (Shikaki 2004). Palestinians may have voted for Hamas not because of its ideology but because of its political program and the absence of any other alternative to Fatah. Ideological affiliation amongst Palestinians has also been influenced by the success or failure of the peace process as Hamas continued to score low in opinion polls during the Oslo years throughout the 1990s However, support for Hamas and suicide bombings increased from 20 per cent to 40 per cent in the late 1990s due to disillusionment with the Oslo peace process (Gunning 2007). Although the political climate has certainly changed in the Palestinian Territories since then, understanding how and why the Islamists reacted to the peace process in the 1990's is vital in analysing their political and armed actions during the current peace talks.

Conclusion

Palestinian Islamist and secular political Identity continues to evolve in response to the ability of Palestinian political players to attract Palestinians to supporting the goals of an Islamist or secular led nationalist cause. The peace process will play a significant role as Palestinian support for either Hamas or Fatah, regardless of their ideological preference,

is dependent on progress or failure in the current peace process. Hamas believes it will benefit from what is sees as the inevitable failure of the current peace talks in convincing Palestinians that the only solution to the conflict is one which relies on the political Ideology of Islamism. However, in a society which has a long experience with secularism, supporting the Islamist Hamas does not mean that Palestinians believe in or will support a strict Islamist ideology. Palestinian Islamists though, such as Hamas, have developed an ideological position that reflects the concerns of the Palestinian community (Milton-Edwards 1999). Hamas and the Islamist alternative challenges the notions of nation and nationalism previously held in secular Palestinian politics. This alternative of Islamist nationalism will continue to be shaped by the unique 'Palestinian Experience' as Palestinians strive to attain a nation of their own. The future of Islamism and nationalism in the Palestinian Territories will depend on the ability of political actors throughout the Palestinian territories to unite and reflect the hopes of the Palestinian population as a whole. It will also depend on Israeli, U.S. and International actors in dealing with Islamist movements such as Hamas and the outcome of the current peace process. It will also be contingent on the ability of Hamas to moderate further and integrate into Palestinian institutions alongside more secular parties such as Fatah. The success or failure of current peace efforts in tandem with the future decisions of Israel, the U.S. and the West to engage or not to engage Hamas will be instrumental in the choices Palestinians make and the continued evolution of Islamism and Nationalism in the Palestinian territories.

Donncha Cuttriss is a student in the Study of Religions Department under the supervision of Dr. Oliver Scharbrodt.