

NOT MUSLIM ZIONISTS

by

Imam Zaid Shakir

(Taken with permission from [“Scattered Pictures-Reflections of an American Muslim”](#) by Zaid Shakir)

As Muslim struggle to achieve control of nation-states, whose boundaries were created by the European colonial powers, we must be very careful not to become overwhelmed by the urge to make attaining and maintaining Islamic statehood the end of our earthly striving. The dangers of doing so are many and merit serious consideration by every Muslim "fundamentalist" who is serious about understanding the ramifications involved in the attainment of political power within the current nation-state system. Among the greatest of these dangers is the risk of sacrificing the ethical imperative of Islam to the power imperative of the modern nation-state. In Islam rituals and institution are not ends in themselves, they are means to a greater end: salvation.

The ultimate end in Islam is to gain the Pleasure and Mercy of God, and to enter Paradise. God says, *Whoever obeys God and His Messenger will be entered into Gardens beneath which rivers flow, to dwell therein forever, that is the Great Triumph.* [4:13] Similarly, *...and the Pleasure of God is Greater, that is the Great Triumph.* [9:72] He also says, *On that day, if the punishment is warded off from anyone, he has received God's Mercy, that is the Clear Triumph.* [6:16]

The acts of worship in Islam are means of improving the character and conduct of the Muslim to help him achieve the "Great Triumph". God says in the Qur'an concerning the ritual prayer, the greatest act of Islam is worship, *Verily the prayer prevents lewdness and indecency.* [29:45] Abu Hurayrah, may God be pleased with him, relates that the Messenger of God, peace and blessings of God upon him, was informed of a woman who prayed all night and fasted all day, but she abused her neighbor with her tongue. He said, "There is no good in her, she will be in the Hellfire."¹

These latter narrations illustrate the ethical imperative that Islam encourages. In this world the goal of a Muslim is to work towards reforming his character and actions. Everything else is a means towards that end – including the attainment of power over a state. When the latter is transformed into an end, it is inevitable that ethical and moral principles will be sacrificed. When such a sacrifice occurs, the state becomes a means to distance its supporters away from the ethical and moral principles, which the state should be advancing. To illustrate this point one needs merely to examine the history of Zionism and the impact it had on Judaism, especially Reform Judaism.

Zionism is a nationalist movement rooted primarily in 19th Century European social and political realities. Early Zionist thinkers such as Nachman Krochmal and Heinrich Eraetz were deeply influenced by Hegelian philosophy. Other European ideas,

¹This tradition has been declared sound by Al-Hakim. It is related by Ibn Hibban, Ahmad and Al-Bazzar. It is quoted from Adh-Dhahabi, *Kitab Al-Kaba'ir*, (Cairo: Al-Maktabat at-Tawfiqiyya), 160.

such as nationalism, imperialism, and ethnocentricity (ideas popularized by the likes of Hegel, Herder, Ranke, Nietzsche, Mazzini, and others) were to find their way into the writings of Zionist thinkers such as Moses Hess, Pinsker, Ahad Ha'am and Herzl.² This synthesis of European social philosophy and Jewish national consciousness was to create a powerful Jewish nationalism whose focal point would eventually become the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine.

Zionism, despite its passionate appeal to Jewish tradition and scriptures, was a novel idea among the vast majority of Jews. Its strongest advocates were secularist, or even atheists. It further appeared a time when Reform Judaism was consolidating its appeal among the newly emancipated Jews of Western Europe and America. The Zionist program, which largely rejected any moral or ethical parameters to guide its efforts towards the creation of a Jewish state, was largely antithetical to Reform Judaism. Having rejected both Jewish nationalism and the idea of a "Judenstaat," or state for the Jews, the appeal of Reform Judaism was largely ethical. In the words of Norton Mesvinsky:

Reform extended another proposition of Traditional Judaism that Jews had been given a prophetic, universalist mission to bring God's message to all human beings. This message was moral and ethical; it beseeched all people to live according to principles of justice and mercy that would finally result in fulfillment of the Messianic promise of peace, brotherhood and righteousness. Jews according to Reform were a "chosen" people only in the sense of being messengers of God's word but in no way did they constitute a nation.³

Many Orthodox Jews also opposed Zionism, although for different reasons. A letter written by Rabbi Joseph Hayyim Sonnenfeld in the aftermath of the first Zionist Conference illustrates that opposition,

With regard to the Zionists, what shall I say and what am I to speak? There is dismay also in the Holy Land that these evil men who deny the Unique One of the World and His Holy Torah have proclaimed with so much publicity that it is in their power to hasten redemption for the people of Israel and gather the dispersed from the ends of the earth. They have also asserted their view that the distinction between Israel and the nations lies in nationalism, blood and race, and that faith and religion are superfluous ... Dr. Herzl comes not from the Lord, but from the side of pollution...⁴

Eventually, this resistance to Zionism was overcome owing to a number of factors. The establishment and expansion of a Jewish state in Palestine, the central theme of the Zionist movement, became the central theme of the Jewish religion. By making the

² For an excellent overview of the effect of European intellectual currents on 19th century Zionist thinkers, see Shomo Avineri, *The Making of Modern Zionism*, (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

³ Norton Mezvinsky, "Reform Judaism and Zionism", in Roselle Tekiner, et al., *Anti-Zionism: Analytical Reflections*, (Brattleboro, Vermont: Amana Books, 1988), 314-315.

⁴ Rev. Dr. William Walmsley, "The State of Israel: Biblical Prophecy or Biblical Fallacy", in EAFORD and AJAZ, *Judaism or Zionism*, (London: Bath Press, 1986), 49.

return to Palestine, with all of the brutality involved in that return, the focal point of Judaism, the moral and ethical concerns that had historically characterized that faith were destroyed. The Zionist agenda became the Jewish agenda, and wittingly or unwittingly the excesses of Zionism came to be endorsed by Judaism. The rabid ethnocentrism, cynicism, oppression, ethnic cleansing, deceit, murder and mayhem, which are an integral part of the Zionist program, all of which would have been condemned by Reform Judaism in its infancy, now encounter no significant opposition from the mainstream Jewish community. This transformation of Judaism has one major cause – it is in the national interest of Israel.

The point we wish to make is that a similar transformation could easily occur in Islam, if we Muslims make the attainment of an "Islamic" state an end towards which all other "religious" considerations must be sacrificed. The nature of the institution of the nation-state and the international state system dictate that there will be discrepancies between the ethical and moral imperatives of Islam and the dictates involved in pursuing a state's national interest. Propaganda may allow for a concealment of that discrepancy, however, as the history of Zionism shows, even the most sophisticated concealment is unmasked by time and the persistence of truth in manifesting itself.

As Muslims we must make a firm, a priori commitment to the truth, morality and ethics, even if by so doing we undermine our ability to achieve or maintain a "state". Ours is a battle for hearts and minds, not territory. When we win the former battle (and it is the easiest one to fight owing to the moral bankruptcy of many modern institutions and ideas) more mundane goals will be achieved in due course. We have an instructive lesson in the example of the early Muslim armies who rather than usurping the lands of the people they conquered were content to live in their garrison towns separate from the conquered folk. When the moral superiority of Islam was demonstrated to those people by the sterling example of the Muslims, the conquered people and their lands were won over for Islam. The uncritical, ill-conceived, abusive exercise of state power can actually retard the moral victory of Islam, just as it has undermined the moral loftiness of Judaism.

Another feature of Zionism, which we must avoid, is the tendency of political parties or movements to de-legitimize all other schools of thought once they ascend to power. The ascendancy of the Zionist movement to power in the State of Israel meant the effective death of all other interpretations of Judaism. As mentioned above, the ethical orientation of Reform Judaism was crushed. Perhaps even more tragically, the tolerant spirit of Oriental Judaism, which had allowed for a peaceful coexistence with the majority Muslim communities of the Middle East and Africa, was permanently altered. This tragedy is captured in the words of the late Ismail Faruqi:

Zionism has terrorized the Jews of the Arab world in order to *get* them to emigrate to Palestine to fill the homes vacated by the Palestinians. It has thus uprooted them from their lands and the environment in which they lived and prospered for centuries. Besides this robbery, Zionism has imposed upon the Oriental Jews the mentality and ideology of Europe. Racism and ethnocentrism, nationalism and materialism, individualism and utilitarianism, sexual promiscuity and anarchism, nihilism and existentialism, skepticism in knowledge and religion: this is the legacy of Europe imposed upon the Jews of the Orient in the name of "westernization" or "progress". It has destroyed their faith in God and His law.⁵

⁵ Al-Faruqi, "Judaism, Zionism and Islam", in EAFORD and AJAZ, 64.

This consequence of Zionism was inevitable once the movement came to power because Zionism was equated with the Israeli national interest, and vice versa. Furthermore, the Israeli national interest became equated with the greater good of Judaism. Hence, what was good for Israel was good for Judaism, and that which threatened Israel threatened Judaism. Anti-Zionist interpretations of Judaism have to be discredited and suppressed because they are detrimental to Israel's national interest. Anti-Zionist Jews are described as traitors to the Jewish people. Hence, political differences become religious heresy, and religiously- based dissent becomes political treason!

Muslims endeavoring to implement Islam, a universal religion, within the confines of a nation-state run the risk of falling into a similar form of chauvinism. This is especially true in the sense that the current political arrangement in the Muslim world is an extension of colonization. Therefore, most of the Islamic struggles are national liberation movements. Additionally, most Islamic movements endorse a specific methodology or approach, i.e. mass education, cadre education, clandestine organization, armed struggle, or Muslim social activism etc. and each tends to view its approach as the most effective and appropriate for the situation it confronts. These features of Islamic movements contain the seeds of chauvinism, which if combined with the coercive apparatus of the modern state, could result in a heavy-handed attempt to forcibly stifle other interpretations of Islam.

An example of this chauvinism can be glimpsed from the ascension of the House of Saud to power in Arabia. Since consolidating their control over the state apparatus in Arabia, the Saudis have systematically enforced their version of the Hanbali juridical school or what has come to be referred to in some quarters as "Wahhabism". The Saudis' view of Islam has been effectively raised to the level of a state religion, despite the fact that prior to the creation of the Saudi state the adherents of other juridical schools were and still are quite numerous in Arabia. Today those schools and their followers have scant say in "religious" matters—foreign or domestic.

A more contemporary example of this chauvinism can be found in the Iranian Islamic experiment. Sunni groups, which questioned the Islamicity of aspects of the country's constitution, were stifled. Shi'i groups that challenged the novel idea of Rule of the Jurisconsult (Wilaayati Faqih) were excluded from the political arena. Muslims belonging to the global Islamic community, who were supposedly represented by the Islamic regime in Tehran, were given no voice whatsoever in the formulation of foreign policies, even though those policies in many instances contained serious repercussions for Muslims outside of Iran. Dissenters were condemned in Islamic terms, sometimes being labeled hypocrites (munaafiqin)⁶, corrupters (fasiqin), enemies of the prophetic family (Amawi), etc.

The challenge for Muslims aspiring to control a state is to realize that no one movement can speak for all Muslims. Furthermore, the Islamic movement in any one country cannot claim to be a reflection or representative of the universal Islamic

⁶ In spite of this criticism, we in no way endorse the terrorist tactics of the Mujahideen Khalq Organization (MKO) who were derisively referred as the Munafiqeen Khalq by the Iranian government and its supporters.

community—as long as it organizes itself along nationalist lines, and tries to implement its interpretation of Islam through institutions, which were created to facilitate secular not Islamic rule. Those institutions by nature are hierarchical and power-centric. We need a new vision, we need to create new institutions, and we need to learn the lessons being presented to us by contemporary history to ensure that we do not become Muslim Zionists.