

The Washington Times

www.washingtontimes.com

Another century of Middle East crisis?

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Published August 14, 2006

Once again, terrorism triggered a brutal war in the Middle East. The regional and global security ramifications are alarming. Despite the intensified diplomatic efforts at the United Nations and elsewhere to stop the unprecedented escalation of hostilities between the antagonists, there is little hope of a *modus vivendi*, let alone a durable peace.

Indeed, the old-new Middle East conflict will most likely linger on for at least a century of terrorist activities, periodic flare-ups, eruptions of armed skirmishes, low-intensity confrontations, and perhaps even full-scale wars both on the conventional and unconventional levels.

Two core reasons account for this tragic and seemingly inevitable outlook: First, the continued radicalization of Arab nationalism vis-a-vis Zionism and Israel; and second, the Islamization of the "question of Palestine" within the context of the jihadist war against the West and other perceived adversaries, including moderate Arab and Muslim countries.

More specifically, contemporary Arab nationalism, which began with the Islamic intellectual awakening and cultural revival in the second half of the 19th century, gained momentum with the end of the Ottoman Empire 50 years later, and reached its peak in the post-World War II period, is dominated by twin ideas: independence and unity. The concept of independence is manifested in the continuing struggle of individual Arab countries to regain and maintain sovereignty; the notion of unity is reflected in the "Pan-Arab" dream of uniting all Arabic-speaking peoples, Muslims and Christians alike, and also in the "Pan-Islamic" idea of bringing under one flag all Muslims, Arabs and non-Arabs, such as Iranians.

Thus, Arab nationalism is a paradox. On one hand it represents deep-rooted feelings of separatism and parochialism stemming from territorial, dynastic, ideological, theological and personal rivalries; on the other, an equally compelling sense of solidarity and harmony nourished by consciousness of a common historical legacy, cultural heritage and unfulfilled aspirations.

Regardless of the conflicting divisive and cohesive elements of these ideas and forces, the predominant, most immediate aim of radical Arab nationalism is the removal of the last vestiges of Western colonialism from Arab lands. These die-hard extremists are firmly convinced that without total elimination of foreign influence, there can be no unification of the fragmented Arab world, and that without a unified Arab nation, widespread economic development and social progress are impossible. Thus, perpetuation of a highly active xenophobia, combined with threats

and use of force, is an inseparable component of militant Arab nationalism as long as the main objective -- unity -- remains unattainable.

It is against this background that the Arab-Israeli conflict must be considered, for the ultimate control of "Palestine" is to radical Arabs a continuation of the struggle against American and Western domination of the Middle East. As such, this conflict must be viewed on two levels: first, as the problem of an Arab Palestine occupied by a Jewish entity; and second, as a question of national-geopolitical antagonism that exists between Israel and radical Arab states like Syria and the Sudan.

Ever since the establishment of Israel nearly 60 years ago, the emphasis has shifted from one level to the other depending on the needs of the Arab ideologists at a particular stage in the evolution of the conflict. Whether it be a clash between Palestinian nationalism and Zionism, or an antagonism between Arab and Jewish states, the focal point has always revolved around the physical and emotional concept of "Palestine," and the implications arising therefrom.

In short, Israel represents to Arab militants a foreign malignant body in the heart of Arabdom, a presence that is ideologically alien, morally and legally indefensible, diplomatically an affront, politically an injustice, and militarily a constant threat to their security and their hopes for unity and economic and social advancement. The battle with the Jewish state is therefore based on the "law of survival" that excludes any tolerance, compromise and peace.

This political-strategic "zero-sum" game is reinforced by a broader theological dimension that undermines any diplomatic moves toward sustained peace structures. Clearly Islam as a synthesis of a creed and philosophy, as a system of government, and as an economic and social order -- plays an important role in radical Arab political ideology. The "pan-Islam" idea is, after all, one of the pillars of Arab nationalism. These radicals, who regard themselves as the purest Muslims, immensely proud of the history of Islamic hegemony, have always reacted violently to non-Islamic domination of territories considered by them to be part of Islamdom and Arabdom.

The militant Arabs' fierce and total rejection of the Jewish state can be explained from this perspective because its existence contradicts the course of history and God's design. Moreover, the obsessive desire to restore Arab rule over Palestine is fueled by their assertion that the area is of historical and religious significance to Islam.

As Hamas (also known as the Sunni-based "Islamic Resistance Movement"), representing the government of the Palestinian people and currently confronting Israel in Gaza and the West Bank, has long declared that since the Jewish state is located on the "Islamic sacred land," any political settlement constitutes treason to the Arab cause as well as religious heresy. The only solution to the Middle East conflict is therefore fighting a "Jihad" (Holy War) with the support of states such as Syria and Iran and in coordination with sub-state groups like Hezbollah (Shi'ite-oriented "Party of God," also known as "Islamic Jihad for the Liberation of Palestine").

It is this organization that advocates the establishment of a Shi'ite-Islamic rule in Lebanon, and is dedicated to liberate all "occupied Arab lands," including the elimination of Israel. What makes Hezbollah the world's most dangerous terrorist group is its emergence as a major military

force capable of mounting a serious war of attrition against Israel. Its axis with Iran is particularly ominous. After all, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad made numerous statements denying Israel's right to exist, while developing its nuclear arms program for the purpose of realizing Ruhollah Khomeini's revolutionary Islamic strategic goals in the region and beyond.

Moreover, another "wild card" in the terrorist equation is the role of al Qaeda vis-a-vis the Middle East conflict. The stated objective of this worldwide Sunni terrorist network is to unite all Muslims under the rule of the Caliphs. To achieve this goal, Osama bin Laden and his associate Ayman al-Zawahri have continuously asserted that it is the duty of all Muslims to prepare as much force as possible to attack the "enemies of God," including the Jewish state, the United States and other adversaries.

In sum, the religionization of the otherwise secular radical Arab-Islamic-Israeli dispute is not the cause of the decade-long confrontation but rather a symptom of the seriousness of the problem. The challenge, then, for the international community in the 21st century is to beware of a "clash of civilizations." Rather, the mission ahead is an unrelenting "battle of ideas": to expose the militant hijacking of legitimate Arab national grievances and aspirations as well as to defuse negative theological elements from complex political conflicts.

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