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SOCIAL BARRIERS TO PEACE:
SOCIALISATION PROCESSES IN THE RADICALISATION OF THE
PALESTINIAN STRUGGLE

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1.1 The optimism generated following the Oslo Peace Accords has gradually been replaced by despair following the Palestinians and Israelis inability to reach agreement on the core issues including settlements, status of Jerusalem and the rights of Palestinian refugees. Despite subsequent attempts to achieve peace, the conflict has deepened, violence is escalating on both sides and over 3,500 people have been killed since 2000. Israel's intention to disengage from the Palestinians is in part a reaction to the current level of conflict. The construction of what is variously called the "separation barrier," "security fence" or "apartheid wall" within the West Bank is a cornerstone of Israel's latest defence plan. In a number of ways the barrier is symbolic of the wider conflict, emphasising distinctions between Israel and the Palestinians, isolating Palestinian communities, adding to economic and social deprivation and highlighting the limited impact of the international community without American endorsement. Palestinian grievances are being exacerbated by the construction of the barrier and the disengagement plan but the central dispute over land has existed since the formation of Israel in 1948. Yet the rise in widespread Palestinian active protest and radicalisation is a recent phenomenon.

1.2 Explanations for radicalisation of a significant proportion[1] of Muslims within the occupied territories have tended to follow international accounts for the widespread Islamic resurgence.[2] This has led to the Palestinian resurgence also being considered a consequence of economic crisis', large-scale unemployment and poverty, alienation from modern ways of living, cultural dislocation from traditional ways of living due to urban migration and penetration by pervasive Western culture. In addition, Palestinians are seen to have been alienated from their social heritage, separated from territory that they see as rightfully theirs (Paz 2003). These factors have been instrumental in processes of radicalisation within the territories but the analysis overlooks that many of these problems predate the resurgence and are not personally experienced by many people who become more Islamic or terrorists/freedom fighters (Atran 2004, Hoffman 2003).

1.3 Structural problems are prominent factors within processes of radicalisation but we can only explain its contemporary nature and diverse appeal across socio-economic background and gender by examining the interaction between local and international social relations and activities and discursive consciousness. In other words there is a need to identify what has changed within socialisation processes and the dialectical interplay between individuals and society that has contributed to more people, who instead of adopting secular precepts of previous generations are, internalising radical beliefs that challenge both the secular nature of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the Israeli occupation. These beliefs are providing a cornerstone for radicals' identities and a framework for social activities.

1.4 There are a number of factors that have brought about changes in levels of discursive consciousness that include: the increasing distrust of international community, particularly America and disillusionment with the ineffectiveness of neighbouring Arab states which have contributed to the gradual realisation that independence can only be achieved by the actions of Palestinians (Abdallah 2003, Halliday 2002, Saikal 2003). In addition, there has been growing dissatisfaction with secular nationalism, beginning with defeat in the 1967 war led by the Egyptian leader and Arab nationalist, Gamal Abdel Nasser. Recently dissatisfaction has accelerated due to the considerable problems associated with the governing PA including the failure of the peace process, the emergence of the *intifadas,* corruption, human rights' violations, and an inability to provide many Palestinians with basic requirements like employment, housing, transportation, security, water, healthcare, electricity and education[3].

1.5 As a consequence of these structural and ideological factors the PA's power and influence and the legitimacy of the concept of nationalist secularisation have been seriously undermined. The PA seems unable to impose restraint upon the radical movements, even if it wanted to, and there is a danger that the current unrest within Gaza will deteriorate into civil war. These changes have created a power vacuum and void within civil society that other movements have been able to utilise. The most influential movement is Hamas[4] which was able to connect with existing religious sentiment (Abu-Amr 1994, Davis 2003). This was because

religion had remained influential within social habitus, practised even during the periods when secular nationalism was prominent. Religious beliefs, values and practices continued to be transmitted from older to younger generations and local *ulema* remained influential within communities. Generally people were internalising moderate and traditional Islam that was influential within individual consciousness, local cultural activities and communities (Abu-Amr 1994). The use of Islam did not therefore generally include challenging secularism or the Israeli occupation on religious grounds. However as dissatisfaction and ultimately disillusionment has arisen with the peace process, international community and secular representatives, Hamas and Islamic Jihad have been able to utilise existing religious sentiments and widespread opposition to the occupation and attracted popular support because their radical discourse has increasingly been legitimised at a number of levels.

1.6 At a military level, radical groups like Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Al-Aqsa Brigade[5] have raised levels of pride among Palestinians through their actions, particularly when activists have been willing to die for the cause (discussed in more detail shortly). Radicalisation has also been legitimised by the social activities of Hamas in particular. In Gaza and the West Bank, Hamas have established extensive social networks that provide the poor with some of their essential requirements, like food, shelter, jobs, security and education.[6] This is happening at a time when employment prospects are decreasing, real income has dropped by an estimated 30 per cent since the Oslo Accord,[7] malnourishment

amongst children is increasing,[8] schools and universities are regularly closed or disrupted by army incursions and curfews, students are prevented from attending by travel restrictions, wide-scale arbitrary arrests, detentions and imprisonments continue, assassinations and civilian deaths are common, houses and the infrastructure continue to be destroyed by Israel and land is being confiscated to enable the 'barrier' to be built. Consequently there is a real need for welfare services.

1.7   Generations of Palestinians have been exposed to similar conditions but crucially today many are much more aware of the wider issues and alternatives through increased education, Islamic publications and media communications, including the advent of satellite television (Sakr 2001) and the development of the virtual Palestinian community (Aouragh 2003). Individuals are being provided with information and graphic images about incidents and policies at a much faster rate with disturbing representations that contribute to feelings of anger and helplessness. The new media also provides greater opportunities for discussion and dissent than was previously available. Radical Islamic influences can be found within the myriad of television and satellite channels, even as Victor (2004) observed, in children's cartoons and music shows which feature stories and songs about childhood martyrdom and celebrate the deaths of the martyrs. And while the introduction of the newer methods of communication have been significant, a prominent role remains for the more traditional media like newspapers which, as Frisch's (2003) study of the Palestinian media showed, are vehemently opposed to

American and Israeli policies and tend to reinforce negative views with little or no attempt made to provide balance.

1.8 Education as a socialising agent has also been transformed, with many schools and universities penetrated by radical Muslim teachers and student movements to increase Islamic influence. Teachers are transmitting radical views on religion, society and Israel, creating meaning and explanation for the situations faced by students and representing certain modes of behaviour. There are also reports of the involvement of teachers in the recruitment of potential martyrs amongst school children (Victor 2004). At universities, many graduates are leaving universities with radical beliefs and good qualifications and skills that prove useful for the operations of Hamas and Islamic Jihad (Abu-Amr 1994, Paz 2003). Student movements are proving influential in attracting and mobilising support amongst their peers in places of higher education like al-Najah University, which is considered to be the most radical institution, supplying at least 135 suicide bombers during the second intifada (Victor 2004). Peer groups are also playing a much more prominent role and this has coincided with the commensurate decline in the influence of parents often found during times of major disruption which result in parental values, attitudes and behaviour being undermined by the changes (Bandura 1969). In the territories, peer groups are sharing experiences and events that in combination with the media, schools and universities are legitimising radical beliefs as individuals are exposed directly or through secondary sources to humiliation, often of their parents and wider family

members, brutality and wanton destruction by Israeli forces allied to the factors often given to explain Islamic radicalisation like unemployment, poverty and malnutrition. Saleh's (2003) study of the backgrounds of Palestinian bombers highlighted both the importance of these factors and the significance of family members or friends who had already committed such acts.

1.9   These experiences are leading to growing frustration, anger and awareness that secular ideologies and neighbouring and Western nation-states and international institutions have been unable to improve the Palestinians position. The failure of the international community, weaknesses within secular nationalism and continuing Israeli stronghold has led to a growth in Muslims adhering to a more extreme religious discourse. In many instances this is interpreted to mean undertaking the word of Allah through activities aimed at regaining pride and land for the Palestinians and thus intertwining nationalism and religion. These interpretations have been supported by numerous *fatwas*, including most controversially, theological justification for activists deliberately killing themselves[9] in attacking Israelis.

1.10   These multi-layered factors have contributed both to the contemporary radicalisation and at the extreme of this process, the emergence of terrorism that is, as Halliday (2000:83) observed, "born of desperation, not in the sense that people are necessarily destitute or desperate, although some of them certainly are, but in the sense that all other means are apparently exhausted" or, I would add,

discredited. The failure of other political means and lack of viable opportunities for meaningful participation within democratic processes has led to desperation which contributes to individuals' consciously internalising radical discourse and in some instances the decision to become martyrs. A point acknowledged by the late political head of Hamas, Abdul Aziz Rantisi, when expressing his view that "to die in this way [bombing Israelis] is better than to die daily in frustration and humiliation."[10]

1.11   Worryingly for the long-term prospects for peace, children have already been socialised into this way of thinking. Giacaman (2002) has remarked upon how Palestinian children who are living in the midst of warfare are, like young adults, also being motivated to acts of violence through desperation, living in constant fear and "feeling totally helpless and incapacitated."[11] And like older siblings and young adults, children are familiar with martyrdom and fantasize within peer groups over their deaths, waiting for the time when the fantasies become reality (Reuter 2004). The play of young children is now glorifying the attacks, as Salman Salameh, one of the mother's of a male bomber within Victor's (2004: 190) study of predominantly female bombers, remarked "All the children say they want to be martyrs…They play intifada" as part of socialising processes where as the Palestinian Iyad Sarraj noted, "our children are being taught in the mosques, on television, and in schools to die."[12]

1.12 For some Palestinians the desperation of public life is compounded by personal lives. Victor's (2004) analysis also highlights the significance of both the broad Palestinian experiences and those experienced by individuals that contribute towards a conscious decision regarding the extent of their involvement in the independence struggle. In her study, Victor outlines the ways in which socio-economic conditions, Palestinian society and personal experiences combine to create situations where people chose to become martyrs. For instance, the first female martyr, Wafa Idris, shared many of the common Palestinian experiences like economic hardship, humiliation and the arrest of brothers but also faced personal desperation based upon her sterility and subsequent divorce. As her mother Mabrook Idrus, remarked, "she was young, intelligent, and beautiful, and had nothing to live for."[13] Many Palestinians are being socialised through communication and experiences into "the abandonment of hope" (Reuter 2004: 84), dominated by social contexts and power relations, and where radical actions are seen as the only way to exert some control over their destiny. However while many Palestinians are seeking to become martyrs as a consequence of desperation, they are also undertaking the actions for both egotistical and altruistic reasons.

1.13 Acts of Palestinian martyrdom are also motivated by the needs of the community and the concept of nation. As Reuter (2004) commented, highly effective attacks by martyrs are showing that the struggle is of greater importance than individual lives or looking at it from the other side of the coin, the martyrs have relatively

low levels of individualism and are dominated by social goals (Saghieh 2002). In other words individuals are internalising radical discourse that stresses the importance of the wider entity over the individual. This is reflected within discursive consciousness and the willingness to sacrifice life for the common good, even though the fractures with the independence struggle shows that there is no universal agreement about what that constitutes nor how it can be achieved. For the individual, they take on some control over their destinies and egotistically many martyrs are under the impression that undertaking the actions will lead to salvation (Davis 2003, Reuter 2004, Vertigans 2003). And by dying for the Palestinian cause, potential bombers are aware of reactions to acts of martyrdom and the ways that they would be considered within the territories and beyond if they became martyrs. This is because the acts are celebrated within the territories as Um Iyad, the mother of the martyr Izzidene, outlined when discussing how she found out about her son's death, "I heard screams from inside the house and the next thing I knew people were all over me. My cousins and my sister and my daughters-in-law and everybody just sort of enveloped me with screams and hugs and cheers."[15] And as Reuter (2004) noted, parents are regularly seen on television proudly accepting the congratulation of family and friends on the honour of being a parent of someone who had died to help the fight for independence[16]. As more people become martyrs and revered, celebrated with their images plastered across the territories, and their pictures replacing secular heroes on childrens' bedroom walls, the more attractive it can seem to other

individuals to become a martyr and be remembered posthumously as a Palestinian hero/heroine (Davis 2003, Reuter 2004, Victor 2004).

1.14 In conclusion, changes in socialisation and interrelated matrices of social activities are leading to more Palestinians finding out about radical discourse that is communicated by a variety of influential socialising agents across all levels of society. The discourse provides explanations and a sense of meaning in conditions that allow only limited opportunities for change. These conditions, experiences and increased awareness of wider issues are legitimising radical discourse that is seen to be offering long-term solutions to problems for individuals through radicalisation, martyrdom and ultimately salvation. And crucially, these acts are also considered to benefit society, and in particular the fight for independence and as such are causes for celebration. Identity formations have been transformed through changes in social relations and activities that has resulted in self images developing that are more closely intertwined with national and religious consciousness. Palestinians are increasingly becoming aware of the possible impact of radical activities upon peoples' perceptions of them as individuals and in turn this is contributing to their discursive consciousness and concomitant adoption of radical beliefs and behaviour. As more people internalise radical discourse, in legitimising conditions, the harder it will be to break down these social barriers to peace.

END

[1] Even in 1993 when the PLO/PA remained popular, it was estimated that Hamas had a following between 30-40 per cent in the occupied territories (reported in Saikal 2003).

[2] Useful examples can be found within Ayubi (1991), Hiro (2002), Mehmet (1990), Mortimer (1982) and Paz (2001).

[3] For a more detailed discussion of these points see Abu-Amr (1994), Paz (2003), Reuter (2004), Saikal (2003).

[4] Hamas, was formed out of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1987 and means "enthusiasm" or "zeal" and is the acronym for *Harawat al-Muqawama al-'Islamiyya* (the Islamic Resistance Movement).

[5] The Al-Aqsa Brigade is linked to the main party within the PA, the Fatah Party which is led by Arafat. Despite these secular links, the group also utilises Islamic rhetoric and symbols as the basis for resistance (Saikal 2003).

[6] Discussed in Abu-Amr, Z. (1994) and Juergensmeyer, M (2003).

[7] Reported in *Health Development Information and Policy Institute 2002a.*

[8] Reported in *Health Development Information and Policy Institute 2002b*.

[9] There has been considerable debate within the *ulema* about whether actions by Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Hizbollah in Lebanon and groups associated with al-Qa'ida are suicides or acts of martyrdom based around interpretations of the Qu'ran, discussed within Reuter (2004). Hamas and Islamic Jihad, perhaps not surprisingly, consider the attacks by their activists to be acts of martyrdom.

[10] Rantisi's comments were raised in an interview with Juergensmeyer M (2003:71).

[11] Giacaman, R. reported in Westcott, K. (2002).

[12] Sarraj's comments were raised in an interview with Victor, B. (2004: 119).

[13] Mabrook Idrus' comments were raised in an interview with Victor, B. (2004: 41).

[15] Um Iyad's's comments were raised in an interview with Davis, J.M. (2003: 128).

[16] Although as Reuter adds these images have to be considered alongside the possibility that to do otherwise could seem like a betrayal to both the reasoning behind their child's death and the community's struggle. And as Victor (2004) remarked while parents take solace in the possibility of their child's salvation many subsequently feel considerable pain and anguish.

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