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A WAR OF RELIGIONS? GOD FORBID!

One of our former Chiefs-of-Staff, the late Rafael (“Raful”) Eytan, who was not the brightest, once asked a foreign guest: “Are you Jewish or Christian?”

“I am an atheist!” the man replied.

“Okay, Okay,” Raful demanded impatiently, “but a Jewish atheist or a Christian atheist?”

Well, I myself am a 100% atheist. And I am increasingly worried that the Israeli-Palestinian struggle, which dominates our entire life, is assuming a more and more religious character.

The historical conflict began as a clash between two national movements, which used religious motifs only as a decoration.

The Zionist movement was non-religious from the start, if not anti-religious. Almost all the Founding Fathers were self-declared atheists. In his book “Der Judenstaat”, the original charter of Zionism, Theodor Herzl said that “we shall know how to keep (our clergymen) in their temples.” Chaim Weitzman was an agnostic scientist. Vladimir Jabotinsky wanted his body to be cremated – a sin in Judaism. David Ben-Gurion refused to cover his head even at funerals.

All the great rabbis of the day, both Hassidim and their opponents, the Missnagdim, condemned Herzl and cursed him ferociously. They rejected the basic thesis of Zionism, that the Jews are a “nation” in the European sense, instead regarding the Jews as a holy people held together by observance of the divine commandments.

Moreover, in the eyes of the rabbis, the Zionist idea itself was a cardinal sin. The Almighty decreed the exile of the Jews as punishment for their sins. Therefore, only the Almighty Himself may revoke the punishment and send the Messiah, who will lead the Jews back to the holy land. Until then, it is strictly prohibited to “return en masse”. By organizing mass immigration to the country, the Zionists rebel against God and, worst of all, hold up the coming of the Messiah. Some Hassidim, like the Satmar sect in America, and a small but principled group in Israel, the Neturei Karta (Guardians of

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the City) in Jerusalem, still adhere to this belief.

True, the Zionists expropriated the symbols of Judaism (the Star of David, the candlestick of the Temple, the prayer shawl that was turned into a flag, even the name “Zion”) but that was only utilitarian manipulation. The small religious faction that joined Zionism (the “Religious Zionists”) was a marginal group.

Before the Holocaust, we learned in the Zionist schools in Palestine to treat with pitiless scorn everything that was “exile Jewish” – the Jewish religion, the Jewish Stetl, the Jewish social structure (the “inverted pyramid”). Only the Holocaust changed the attitude towards the Jewish past in the diaspora, referred to in Hebrew as “Exile”.)

Ben-Gurion made some concessions to the religious factions, including the anti-Zionist Orthodox. He released some hundreds of Yeshiva-students from military service and set up a separate “state-religious” school system. His aim was to acquire convenient coalition partners. But these steps were based on the assumption (common to all of us at the time) that the Jewish religion would evaporate anyhow under the burning Israeli sun and disappear altogether in one or two generations.

All this changed in the wake of the Six-day War. The Jewish religion staged an astounding comeback.

On the Palestinian side, something similar happened, but against a quite different background.

The Arab national movement, too, was born under the influence of the European national idea. Its spiritual fathers called for the liberation of the Arab nation from the shackles of Ottoman rule, and later from the yoke of European colonialism. Many of its founders were Arab Christians.

When a distinct Palestinian national movement came into being, following the Balfour Declaration and the setting up of the British Government of Palestine, it had no religious character. In order to fight it, the British appointed a religious personality to the leadership of the Palestinian community in Palestine: Hajj Amin al-Husseini, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, who quickly assumed the leadership of the Palestinian struggle against the Zionist immigration. He endeavored to give a religious face to the Palestinian-Arab rebellion. Accusing the Zionist of designs on the Temple Mount with its holy Islamic shrines, he tried to mobilize the Muslim peoples in support of the Palestinians.

The Mufti failed miserably, and his failure played a part in the catastrophe of his people. The Palestinians have all but obliterated him from their history. In the 1950s, they idolized Gamal Abd-al-Nasser, the standard-bearer of secular, pan-Arab nationalism. Later, when Yasser Arafat founded the modern Palestinian national movement, he did not distinguish between Muslims and Christians. Right up to his

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death, he insisted on calling for the liberation of the “mosques and churches” of Jerusalem.

At one stage of its development, the PLO called for the creation of a “Democratic secular state, where Muslims, Jews and Christians will live together”. (Arafat did not like the term “secular”, preferring “la-maliah”, meaning “non-sectarian”.)

George Habash, the leader of the “Arab Nationalists” and later of the “Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine”, is a Christian.

This situation changed with the outbreak of the first intifada, at the end of 1987. Only then did the Islamist movements, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, start to take over the national struggle.

The astounding victory of the Israeli army in the Six-day war, which looked like a miracle, effected a profound political and cultural change in Israel. When the shofar sounded at the Western Wall, the religious youth, which had until then been vegetating on the fringe, occupied the center of the stage.

Suddenly it was discovered that the religious education system, which had been set up by Ben-Gurion as a political bribe and contrary to his own convictions, had been quietly turning out a fanatical religious product. The religious youth movement, which had suffered all these years from feelings of humiliation and inferiority, was filled with zeal and started the settlement drive, leading the main national effort: the annexation of the occupied territories.

The Jewish religion itself underwent a mutation. This mutant shed all universal values and became a narrow, militant, xenophobic tribal creed, aiming at conquest and ethnic cleansing. The religious-Zionists of the new sort are convinced that they are fulfilling the will of God and preparing the ground for the coming of the Messiah. The “national-religious” cabinet ministers, that had always belonged to the moderate wing of the government, gave way to a new, extremist leadership with tendencies towards religious fascism.

Israel has not become a religious state. It still has a large secular majority. According to the authoritative Israeli Government Bureau of Statistics, only 8% of Israeli Jews define themselves as “Orthodox” (Haredim), 9% as “religious” (meaning Religious Zionists), 45% as “secular, non-religious” and 27% as “secular, traditional”.

However, because of their role in the settlement enterprise, the “religious” have acquired a huge influence over the political process. They have practically prevented any move towards peace with the Palestinians. They have also provoked a religious reaction on the other side.

The Palistinian resistance to the occupation, which reached a peak with the outbreak of the first intifada in 1987, has given a big push to the religious forces. Until then, these

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had been growing quietly (not without the encouragement of the occupation authorities, which saw in them a counterweight to the secular PLO.)

The first intifada led to the Oslo agreement and brought Yasser Arafat back to Palestine. But the new Palestinian authority failed in its aim of putting an end to the occupation and establishing a secular Palestinian state. With settlements continually expanding all over the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the Palestinian public increasingly tended to support armed resistance. In this struggle, and with the limited means available, the religious factions excelled. A religious person is more ready to sacrifice his life in a suicide attack than his secular cousin.

The anger of the Palestinian public over the corruption that has infected sections of the secular Fatah leadership (but not the ascetic Yasser Arafat, whose reputation remained clean) has increased even more the popularity of the religious, whose honesty is unquestioned.

For years I have been haunted by a nightmare: that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would change from a national to a religious confrontation.

A national conflict, terrible as it may be, is soluble. The last two centuries have seen many national wars, and almost all of them ended in a territorial compromise. Such conflicts are basically logical, and can be terminated in a rational way.

Not so religious conflicts. When all sides are bound by divine commandments, the attainment of a compromise becomes far more difficult.

Religious Jews believe that God promised them all of the holy land. Thus, giving away any of it to “foreigners” is an unforgivable sin. In the eyes of Muslim believers, the whole country is a Waqf (religious trust), and it is therefore absolutely forbidden to surrender any part of it to unbelievers. (When the Caliph Omar conquered Palestine some 1400 years ago, he declared it a Waqf. His motive was quite practical: to prevent his generals from dividing the land between themselves, as was their wont.)

By the way, the evangelical fundamentalists who dominate Washington at this time also see the Holy Land as a religious property, to which the Jews must return in order to make possible the second coming of Jesus Christ.

Is a compromise between these forces possible? Certainly yes, but it is much more difficult. A devout Muslim is allowed to declare a Hudna (armistice) for a hundred years and more, without condemning his soul to hell. Ariel Sharon, who began the evacuation of settlers, spoke about “long-range temporary arrangements”. In politics, “temporary” measures have a tendency to become permanent.

But wisdom, sophistication and a lot of patience are needed to reach a resolution of the conflict in these circumstances.

On the day Arafat died, many Israelis were angry with me for saying (in a Haaretz

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interview) that we shall yet long for this secular leader, who was both willing and able to make peace with us. I said that his elimination removes the last obstacle to the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Palestine and the entire Arab world.

One did not need to be a prophet to see that.