



Hostage to 9/11

by [Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi](#)

Five years ago, on September 11, I was giving a lecture at Bethlehem University when the news from New York filtered through. Once the scale of what had happened became clear I turned to address my audience angrily.

"This," I said, "is the collapse of the status quo, the collapse of trust and it spells the end of the usual norms. Things will no longer be the same and we, the Arab-Islamic world, will be on the defensive for a long time."

Five years later the world has fundamentally changed. 9/11 brought us the twin cultures of fear and war to govern not only US-Arab/Muslim relations, but also the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

George Bush, unlike his predecessors Bill Clinton, George Bush senior and Jimmy Carter, originally had no inclination to deal with the Middle East, especially the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. But 9/11 gave him an unexpected agenda for the Middle East as well as for the US, the world's only remaining superpower.

Unfortunately, this agenda has become dominated by what might be called the five 'I's: Islamophobia, Iraq, Iran, Israel and Intelligence in the service of disinformation and psychological warfare.

9/11 brought the issues of religious identity and national identity, i.e. faith and patriotism, to the fore. But rather than reflecting carefully about what these meant, they were distorted and twisted by all sides in this new climate of fear and vengeance to promote a perverse political aim that was best summed up by Bush's own "with us or against us" dictum.

Islamophobia, or as Washington now prefers to call it, the struggle against "Islamic Fascism," makes it impossible to distinguish between Muslims, whether "moderate" or "extreme". In fact, Islam and Muslims have become an internal issue in the West much like the "Jewish Question" 60 years ago was an internal issue in Europe. It must be dealt with there, where people do not even realize that Islam per se considered not only 9/11 an evil, unacceptable, and unethical attack, but also prohibits any form of suicide, regarding it a sin.

Further, forcing people to choose between their cultural-religious identity or being "with us" leaves them no option at all. Angry young generations, who've lived under oppressive and corrupt regimes, can turn nowhere in their desire for justice, whether religiously informed or

not, and instead are now willing to sacrifice their lives, something made easy after creating a new meaning for martyrdom, in this void that is created by a black and white world.

Iraq was one victim of the new agenda, and the brutal but secular dictatorship of Saddam Hussein was confused with a haven for "Islamic terrorism", all the better to lump everything into the easily understood and generally accepted rubric with which the whole world was now engaged as the new evil. Iran, a burgeoning regional power with a strong Islamic (Shi'ite) culture and oil resources to boot, is the next stop on this ill-judged tour.

Israel, on the other hand, already a strategic ally of the US and the West, became, by its own volition, a tool to confront these threats that the new worldview from Washington now identifies.

But having lumped all into one category, and on the way exacerbated long-dormant rifts between Sunni and Shi'ite in Iraq and empowered Iran, this new agenda is isolating Israel behind walls it has itself built under the pretext of security and fear. Seen as an outpost of western bigotry against Muslims, it is encouraging more and more in the Arab world to renounce any attempts at recognition or compromise.

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict has become hostage to 9/11. Once the peculiarities of this conflict were subsumed by the "war against terror", room for international pressure, understanding and compromise was gone. Israel was allowed a free hand to exercise its military superiority, which, in the absence of any political plan, achieved only that: killing more Palestinians, taking more of their land, dehumanizing their daily lives and all of that for no observable reason or aim.

On the Palestinian side, meanwhile, Yasser Arafat's leadership and legitimate resistance in general were immediately branded terrorism. Thus, with no political allies, no restraint on Israel and already a part of those "against us", Palestinians have few options but to object, reject and deny.

When Palestinians, a historic first in the region, exercised their democratic right to choose who governs them, they chose Hamas, but not as political Islam. They chose reform and change in the way many in the region would choose those from the so-called, and badly labeled, Islamist parties: because they want to get rid of their corrupt regimes.

But their choice was punished by the West, and rather than a democratically answerable government that would have to yield to the wishes and judgment of its own people, Palestinians got a new government that was never given a chance to succeed or fail. Poverty and unemployment, already at disastrous levels, were irredeemably exacerbated by the international boycott of the Palestinian Authority, a boycott that was a direct consequence of the misbegotten policies arising from 9/11. This is pushing back further and further any possible climate in which Palestinians may again have any faith in a political process.

There have been failures on the Palestinian side, in particular that of the secular intellectual elite to present and defend, both to its own people and to the rest of the world, an alternative that is both modernist, secular, and still firmly rooted in the Arab and Muslim culture from which any successful model of governance in the region must spring.

Palestinians are not al-Qaeda, which hijacked their cause, indeed, hijacked Islam. They are simply a people struggling under the yoke of an oppressive occupation. They happen to be Arab and, mostly, Muslim, and that informs many of their priorities and positions. But fundamentally they are simply struggling for independence and to be free. Like any nation they deserve that, but it will not happen for as long as Israel successfully portrays its continued occupation as somehow a part of the "war against terror" and for as long as the international community, the West in particular and specifically the US, blinded as it is by its pain and thirst for revenge, allows Israel that luxury

► [Published 11/9/2006 © bitterlemons.org](#)

[Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi](#) is head of the *Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs, PASSIA*.