



# Religious Fundamentalism as an Obstacle to Peace in the Middle East

## Under What Conditions Might Pragmatism Prevail?

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Religious fundamentalism may be described as “any claim to exclusive authenticity within a religious tradition.”<sup>1</sup> Scholars in this field concur that religious fundamentalists believe that they are the chosen people and therefore are privileged or burdened with a special mission on behalf of their deity.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, unswerving belief in historical and doctrinal precedent moves them to stand apart from wider society. In this sense many link a ‘golden past’ with a utopian future when group strength will return. Seeking to achieve this, fundamentalists adhere to a specifiable orthodoxy, drawn from holy texts – Bible, Quran, Torah – whose words are interpreted literally by members and to which obedience is mandatory. This leaves no room for uncertainty or compromise. ‘You are either with us or against us’ is a common attitude and those who differ are identified as oppressors, who should be resisted. Whenever conflicts include religious components, fundamentalists are often by some means or other involved.

### Religious Fundamentalists as Saviors of Society: Perceptions, Goals, and Actions

Depending on the nature, depth, and locale of the conflict, fundamentalist core operations may range from peaceful protests to attacks on public or private institutions and individuals to guerrilla warfare. The religious fundamentalist groups analyzed below have each undertaken one or more of these activities. By incorporating the role of the savior of society they are able to justify any action, however extreme, as well as any personal sacrifice no matter how great.

The aforementioned attitudes, perspectives, and especially the violent behavior of hardliner Arab and Israeli religious fundamentalists indicate that they are particularly ‘negative’ to the goals of the Middle East Conference (MEC). This being said, a word of caution is appropriate. Not all religious fundamentalists share the characteristics described above. Thus, it is important to distinguish between fundamentalists that are less influenced by ideology than by circumstances. Contrary to ‘essentialist’ approaches, which focus mostly on the religious character of fundamentalists or even on religious texts as their bases, we assume that it is more appropriate to analyze the broader political context and the way it can shape the behavior of fundamentalists within the Middle East conflict. Instead of analyzing the religious core of these groups we will therefore focus on their ability to adapt to changing circumstances in a pragmatic way. We will show that, in fact, the positions and attitudes of fundamentalist groups can change with evolving political circumstances.

Moreover, fundamentalists are by no means the only ones opposed to the peace process in the Middle East. Those who espouse liberal and/or secular-conservative views may also reject it. Fundamentalists are thereby not necessarily the greatest challenge to the success of the MEC. Indeed, they are a modest but highly vocal part of the conflict scenario. However, many individuals do support their positions and can be mobilized by religious fundamentalist groups to reject any compromise.

### Abstract

Religious fundamentalists have in several instances served as barriers to the peaceful conclusion of disputes in the Middle East, especially in the framework of the peace process in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As a consequence and irrespective of the specific definition of fundamentalism, these groups can constitute in various countries a substantial hurdle for any arms control initiative such as the upcoming Middle East Conference (MEC). This gathering, planned for late 2012, is to deal with the establishment of a zone free of all kinds of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and their delivery vehicles (DVs). Achieving a successful and sustainable outcome at the MEC could be hampered by a host of problems, one of which is the difficult role that religious fundamentalism could possibly play in undermining this initiative. Hence, this POLICY BRIEF provides decision makers and practitioners with information on these presumably ‘negative’ actors, drawn from case studies covering various fundamentalist groups within the Middle East and beyond. These recommendations are based on the key finding that, contrary to mainstream expectations, the major players can behave pragmatically, provided they are acting in favorable circumstances. ■

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**Religion and Militancy among Muslim Arabs**

		<i>Percent agreeing that U.S. interference in the region justifies armed operations</i>	<i>Percent disagreeing that despite negative U.S. foreign policy most Americans are good people</i>
<i>Personal Religiosity</i>	<i>Less Religious</i>	59	41
	<i>More Religious</i>	57	45
<i>Support for Political Islam</i>	<i>Less Supportive</i>	52	26
	<i>More Supportive</i>	61	47
<i>Interpretation of Islamic Codes</i>	<i>Less Conservative</i>	49	22
	<i>More Conservative</i>	60	46

The corresponding figures can be found under: <http://www.arabbarometer.org/>.

**Some Survey Findings about Religion and Militancy among Muslim Arabs**

The results of the most recent Arab Barometer analyzed, amongst other things, the degree to which particular religious orientations help to shape individuals' views about the U.S. and the West by measuring personal religiosity, the level of liberalism-conservatism in Islamic interpretation, and attitudes towards political Islam.<sup>3</sup> An analysis of the degree to which each of these three religious orientations influences attitudes on militancy found that greater personal religiosity is not associated with greater militancy or stronger negative attitudes towards the West. By contrast, both, greater conservatism in Islamic interpretation and greater support for political Islam, are associated with greater militancy. Although multivariate analysis was employed and each relationship is statistically independent of the others, the findings only suggest but do not prove that the relationships involve causal connections. The accompanying bivariate table (see above) illustrates the character of these relationships.

The general patterns may not apply in each country. However, the Arab Barometer data suggests that religion and religiosity do not predispose Muslim Arabs towards greater militancy but that more specific orientations associated with Islam do increase the likelihood of holding more negative and militant attitudes towards the U.S. and the West. Future surveys will measure continuity and change in

religious orientations. The known correlates of these orientations may be used to project the future trends in militancy and attitudes towards the West.

**Structure and Outline of this POLICY BRIEF**

Drawing insights from the evolution and operations of these actors, this POLICY BRIEF investigates which attitudes fundamentalist groups are likely to hold in view of the Middle East Conference. The guiding questions are as follows:

- What are the ideology, constituency, and goals of the respective fundamentalist group?
- How influential are these groups within their society as well as abroad and how has this changed over time?
- Do they act as spoilers to the Middle East peace process and are they likely to do so for the Middle East Conference?

The selected fundamentalist groups are Israeli settlers, Palestine's Hamas, Lebanon's Hezbollah, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the Jordanian Islamic Action Front, the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and American Christian Zionists. These actors were chosen because they all use their influence to directly affect the outcomes of issues involved in the Middle East conflict. All of these are analyzed also with regard to the strategies, tactics, and activities chosen to

» Religion and religiosity do not predispose Muslim Arabs towards greater militancy.«



advance their goals. Several propositions are drawn from the cases presented, regarding the potential capacity of the respective fundamentalist groups to adopt pragmatic and accommodative positions towards negotiation when their interests are involved. Recommendations are lastly made for actions to aid the modification of the rigid positions of these actors and to encourage compromise solutions.

### **A View of Jewish Fundamentalism: The Secular-Liberal Alliance**

Generally, the term 'Israeli-Palestinian conflict' is associated with the territorial issues of the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem, rather than with Israel's right to exist. As a result, Jewish-Israeli fundamentalism has been preoccupied with the settlements built on lands Israel occupied in the 1967 War, their inhabitants, and their political and religious claims. The claim to the entire 'Holy Land' due to religious, historical, and emotional attachment has been attributed only to orthodox Jews (and Christian Zionists). Yet, secular Israeli leaders frame their political discourse using religious fundamentalist rhetoric.

#### **Israel's Split Personality?**

By any definition of Jewish orthodoxy, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is a secular Israeli and a leader of a political party that is committed to democratic values and procedures, including the separation between state and religion. Yet, his speech at the UN General Assembly in late September 2011 exhibited typical fundamentalist rhetoric such as allusions to the Jewish people's history of continuous presence on the land. The implication was that it should never be ceded to others.

This indicates that in Israel, ironically, the leading secular officials support and even admire the settlers. The speech was actually applauded by mainstream politicians and increased the Prime Minister's approval rating. More dramatically, there was no public indignation over this speech by average secular, pragmatic Israelis.

#### **Fundamentalist Groups: Alliances, Actions, and Support**

The ideological settlers' movement, Gush Emunim, emerged from the ashes of the 1973 Yom Kippur War. The Likud Party

developed four years after the war also as a result of public repulsion against the Labor Party's corruption. The strategic blunder that allowed this was attributed to the secular escapist attitude of the Israeli Labor left-wing governments. The national Zionist camp knew how and when to make the best out of the national crisis. They offered the confused and bitter Israelis a new challenge – an attractive alternative to the desire to normalize life in Israel.

In addition to the alliance with the secular right-wing Zionists, the 'classical' fundamentalist (Zionist orthodox right-wing) community has consolidated close relations with two other constituencies: the non- and even anti-Zionist ultra-orthodox community, and the secular, non-ideological settlers. Both of these groups moved to the occupied territories in order to improve their quality of life. Many of them adopted a right-wing ideological position in order to justify their move.

The common ground for these groups is their interest in staying in their homes, expanding their communities, and keeping the special federal and municipal benefits that all Israeli governments (except Yitzhak Rabin's) have been offering them. In order to sustain these interests, the settlers have to make sure that the Palestinian occupied territories will never turn into a Palestinian State.

#### **Palestinians as Allies? Militancy Aids Jewish Fundamentalist Outreach**

The suicide/martyrdom attacks on Israeli civilians were started by the Islamic Jihad after the PLO had signed the Oslo Agreements. Hamas followed as a result of the 1994 massacre by a Jewish settler in Hebron, while Fatah militants did so after the liquidation of their colleague, Read Karmi, by the Israeli army in January 2002. Moreover, the series of rocket attacks from Gaza after the Israeli withdrawal in 2005 also played into the hands of the settlers' coalition. The reconciliation discourse gave way to a national, basically fundamentalist discourse. Since then, the settlers have enhanced their penetration of the political, military, and judicial establishments, as well as the media. Having gained power, in pursuit of their national and religious values, they began to amend laws, which were in the way of turning Israel into a more 'Jewish' state

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(according to their interpretation) and a less democratic one.

As long as they are not faced with local and/or external pressure, there seems to be very little potential to contain Jewish fundamentalists besides a regime change. Yet, polls demonstrate that the majority of the Israelis are content with the current government. The only hope might be that a second-term Obama administration will place the conflict at the top of its agenda.

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 **Hamas: Tamed?** 

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Among the potential fundamentalist spoilers for progress in Middle Eastern peace, Hamas is probably at the same time the most infamous and the most sedated actor. After decades of suicide/martyrdom attacks, continued rocket fire on Israeli territory, and uncompromising rhetoric, militant action on the ground has been very limited over the past seven years. While many fail to recognize this development, it might be taken as a prime example for the ability and willingness of fundamentalist religious groups to cope with changing political environments and requirements.

The origins of the Islamic Resistance Movement Hamas are located outside of the Palestinian Territories. They can be traced back to the founding of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928. With Jerusalem being a holy site for Muslims, the movement led by Hassan Al-Banna dedicated time and energy to the British mandated territory of Palestine early on.<sup>4</sup> As in Egypt itself, the Muslim Brotherhood managed after 1948 to establish a system of education and social welfare through a dense network of mosques, schools, and hospitals. The declared goal was to change Palestinian society by establishing an 'Islamic system.'

While the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt maintained this strategy and mostly refrained from armed struggle, the Palestinian branch developed in a different direction. When in 1987 the first Intifada started, the leadership of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood convened to discuss how to deal with the new situation. In order not to miss out on a unique opportunity to gain public support, it was agreed to participate in the struggle. At the same time, in order not to damage what had been built over years by a potentially

failing uprising, it was decided to participate under a different name. In late 1987, Hamas was founded and presented itself to the Palestinian public by leaflets and the charter as the "Palestinian Branch of the Muslim Brotherhood."<sup>5</sup>

Over the following years, Hamas became a synonym for armed violence in the eyes of many, first and foremost through suicide/martyrdom bombings. Of course, those who supported Hamas considered such attacks a legitimate means of confronting a superior power. Especially during the second Intifada (from 2000 until 2005), these tactics enabled Hamas to both obstruct the peace process and gain popular support as the only resistance movement perceived to be effective.

The growing support for Hamas was one of the factors that led to a significant change within the movement. In the run-up to the parliamentary elections in 2006 and after intense internal debates, the Hamas leadership decided to participate in the elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council. With Gaza having been its stronghold already, Hamas used the Israeli unilateral disengagement, in the summer of 2005, as ultimate proof that their 'rejection' policy was more effective than the PLO negotiations approach. As a result, Hamas later on won the elections in a landslide victory. The political ramifications, however, go well beyond the gain in political support: By taking part in the elections Hamas effectively recognized a system it claimed to fight.

The electoral program of Hamas' 'List for Reform and Change' mostly refrained from religious references and focused on political challenges inside the Palestinian society. Israel only played a marginal role in this document. According to leading Hamas representatives, the 2005 platform remains their valid political program until today.

The huge differences to the uncompromising charter led observers to different conclusions. Many – including Israel, the U.S., and the EU – referred to the continued firing of self-made rockets from Gaza to point out that a change of Hamas was mere camouflage. Others came to the conclusion that Hamas had taken the path of many other resistance movements and had undergone the transformation from an armed resistance group to a political party.

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Both observations are, to a certain extent, true. This tightrope walk remains the main characteristic of Hamas and has become even more relevant since the organization seized power in the Gaza Strip in the tumultuous events of summer 2007. Ever since, Hamas has had to cope with a self-inflicted threefold identity: as a political party, it had won democratic elections. As an armed movement that still receives a considerable share of its funding from Iran, it had taken over power. As an administrative entity, it had taken over responsibility for more than 1.5 million people living in Gaza under harsh conditions. This complexity shapes the political alignment of Hamas until today.

The political focus of the organization after 2007 has been on two areas: consolidation and recognition. On the one hand, Hamas tries to establish a functioning administration in Gaza. On the other hand, representatives of Hamas struggle to get the world to recognize Hamas as a 'normal' political party which can – and must – be part of any future political settlement. Efforts to religiously reform Palestinian society and to fight Israel have become secondary at best. On the contrary: Hamas officials do not cease to repeat the official position of the movement. Mantra-like, it is proclaimed that the 'minimal demand' of Hamas is the establishment of an independent Palestinian state within the borders of 1967 with East Jerusalem as its capital, together with a 'just solution' for the Palestinian refugees. With these demands being fulfilled, Hamas would, according to Khaled Meshal, head of the organization's political bureau, sign a long-term truce with Israel. This position – which effectively accepts the two-state solution – has been upheld for several years now, despite huge internal pressure and the Gaza War of 2008/2009.

With the power gain of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Hamas' situation is today more comfortable than a few years ago. This actor is unlikely to give up the option of armed resistance without substantial concessions in return. Keeping in mind that the movement remains one of the most important spoilers for any Middle Eastern peace effort, the willingness of Israel and its allies to grant some concessions would thus present a huge opportunity not only to advance the stagnating peace process, but also to limit Iran's role in the equation.

## Religious Fundamentalism with Nationalist Goals: The Case of Hezbollah

Among the motivations that inspire religious fundamentalists' beliefs and drive their actions, the category of 'nationalist' fits the case of Hezbollah (the Party of God), the powerful Shiite political actor with a growing arsenal of sophisticated missiles. This group, while pursuing an essentially secular political mission (for instance the elimination of foreign occupation from national territory), however frames its mission as an obligation required by the dictates of religious orthodoxy.

### Origins of Hezbollah and Its Goals

Hezbollah emerged in the early 1980s as a result of Shiite clerics and lay people who considered Jihad, in the military sense, against Israeli occupation of a strip of southern Lebanese territory, a mission of political and religious obligation. As a result of Iran's desire to export the Islamic Revolution, the Lebanese actors were provided with military training, organization, and material. Syria, an ally of Iran, welcomed a force which would replace Palestinian fighters who had been evacuated after the Israeli invasion of 1982 and would insure that weapons coming from Iran reached Hezbollah. It would be up to Hezbollah to cement the local political support necessary to safeguard the fighting-wing from domestic and foreign efforts to erase it.

### Religious Fundamentalism and Its Role in Mobilizing Shiite Support for the Resistance

Hezbollah's constituency is basically Shiite and its religious leaders and local officials have mobilized support by creating an Islamic environment in the areas politically dominated by the organization. Religious commemorations, celebrations of Hezbollah military activities, the establishment of seminaries (Hausas) and mosques are some of the avenues through which this is facilitated. A network of charitable Islamic institutions, provision of extensive social and public services as well as the promotion of Islamic values and practices through its television channel Al-Manar (The Beacon) are also very important.<sup>6</sup>

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The charismatic leader Hassan Nasrallah further plays a key role in mobilizing recruits and securing donations by references to Israelis as ‘usurpers of Muslim lands’ and his reminders of the blessings of martyrdom.

### **Efforts to Rally the Broader Lebanese Society Behind the Resistance**

Through the above strategies and its military feats against the Israelis, Hezbollah has gathered the political support necessary to win elections. In so doing, it has become a mainstream political party, promoting its struggle as a Lebanese national resistance as well as an Islamic resistance against Israel. The support of other Lebanese sects, political parties, and regional and international groups was thereby gained.

On the other hand, Hezbollah’s military resistance activities, costly Israeli retaliations, and its monopoly of force have been highly resented by Lebanese officials and many citizens, particularly those of Christian and Sunni faith. Efforts to disarm Hezbollah by its local and foreign opponents therefore continue.

### **Fighting the Enemy**

Hezbollah’s military performance in July 2006 showed that it had become an Arab army capable of wielding advanced weaponry and blending classical guerrilla tactics with those of conventional warfare. The consequences were a flood of donations to Hezbollah from enthusiastic regional and international supporters and rapid action by Iran and Syria to replenish Hezbollah’s armory. Of especial relevance is the charge to have supplied Grad missiles.<sup>7</sup> A Hezbollah-influenced government is now in power.

### **Convincing the Party of God to Forego its Resistance Mission**

Hezbollah leaders’ virulent political discourse against the Israeli and American enemy renders any suggestion that it would willingly lay down its arms a moot point. Yet, if a land-for-peace deal between Israel, Lebanon, and Syria were concluded, arms shipments to Hezbollah would eventually halt, curtailing or seriously weakening its resistance agenda. Pragmatic leaders would then presumably turn their attention to internal politics.

Thus, a resumption of land-for-peace talks is the most promising means of sidelining Hezbollah and should be encouraged by those who are interested in such an outcome.

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### **The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood: Pragmatic Fundamentalists in Search of Political Legitimacy**

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The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (EMB), founded in 1928 by Hassan Al-Banna, appeals primarily to Egypt’s pious middle class. The EMB advocates a leading role for Islam in government. Although the organization has a strong pan-Islamic orientation, its efforts are focused on Egypt.

### **Goals and Methods**

Throughout its history, the EMB has evolved in relation to circumstances. At first, it was a missionary movement dedicated to reforming society along Islamic lines. However, by the 1940s, it had adopted an increasingly political position, emulating other political movements in forming a paramilitary wing. During the 1950s and 1960s, a number of its affiliates responded to suppression at the hands of Gamal Abdel Nasser’s secular regime by adopting a confrontational stance. The EMB ideologue Sayyid Qutb called for the creation of a vanguard movement to overthrow the regime and establish an Islamic state.

### **Accommodation to Authoritarianism**

However, during the 1970s and 1980s, the Brotherhood explicitly repudiated the revolutionary aspects of Qutb’s ideology and revived its reformist mission. The EMB’s task was stated to be preaching God’s message, not to judge or to confront the political authority. However, the leadership allowed an exception to this rule in cases where Muslims endured occupation, as in Palestine. As a result, the organization supported the armed resistance of Hamas, its organizational spin-off in Gaza.

Following this track, the Brotherhood generally complied with the restrictive laws imposed by the Mubarak presidency. In return, the regime tolerated a moderate level of political activity. However, the government curtailed the EMB whenever it gained too much ground. Towards the

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end of Mubarak's rule, repression was particularly harsh, prompting the EMB to partially withdraw from the political scene.

### **The Brotherhood Responds to Egypt's 2011 Revolution**

When the uprising against the Mubarak regime broke out in January 2011, the EMB was caught off guard. But once it was committed to the protests, its role was crucial. Spurred by its youth leaders, the EMB added its weight to the initially overwhelmingly secular opposition movement. Very quickly it formed a separate political wing, the Freedom and Justice Party, which won a parliamentary majority and then the office of presidency in Egypt's January and June 2012 elections. While the EMB continues its charitable and religious work, the political party is adapting itself to Egypt's political transformation. Its immediate challenge will be to alter the constellations of power on the ground in its favor. Important aspects in this will be its positioning towards or against the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, which still wields parts of the executive authority.

### **Political Pragmatism Tops Fundamentalist Ideology**

Since its foundation, the EMB has been guided by realism and open to the possibility of change within the framework of its ideology. A case in point is its position on the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty. The EMB strongly supports the Palestinian cause. However, now that it dominates Egypt's politics, it must act pragmatically in order to maintain this position. While it criticizes Israeli policy, it understands that Egypt's military and most of the population would balk at the possibility of costly conflict, not to mention the United States, an important supporter of the treaty, whose goodwill the Brotherhood cannot afford to alienate. In light of these circumstances, the EMB leadership is likely to uphold the treaty, even while individual members condemn it.

### **Political Legitimacy as a Major Goal**

Given the EMB's political ascendancy through democratic elections, Egyptian and international agencies have little choice except to recognize it as a legitimate

component of Egypt's political scene. Although an Islamist government is worrisome to many, the Muslim Brothers are rational political actors engaged with and influenced by the Egyptian society and the wider international community. We expect the fundamentalist but pragmatic EMB to play the political game in ways gauged to maximize its own position of influence in a balancing act between inter-institutional power political tactics on the one hand and popular domestic as well international legitimacy on the other.

While this process might turn out not to be an entirely smooth one domestically, it is unlikely, from today's perspective, that the Brotherhood's position concerning the Middle East Conference will shift significantly towards a predominance of the ideological orientation.

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### **Jordan's Islamic Action Front: A Loyal Opposition?**

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The Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood (JMB) as well as its political arm, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), have always had a symbiotic and somehow special relationship with the House of the Jordanian King. When political parties were banned in 1957, the JMB remained legal on the grounds that it was not a party. The Islamist movement acted largely as a movement of 'loyal opposition' doing little, if anything, to actually threaten the status quo of Hashemite hegemony. As a reward, the King has granted the Islamist movement a greater degree of freedom to organize as well as autonomy in their social and political activities than similar movements received in most other Arab states. The favorable treatment under the Hashemites and the violent repression of its counterparts in Egypt and Syria formed a historical memory, which had a general moderating effect on the JMB's political orientation.<sup>8</sup>

### **Official Stance: Rejecting the Jordanian-Israeli Peace Treaty**

The IAF is predominantly a pragmatic organization, whose positions are flexible and sensitive to different circumstances and vulnerable to political dynamics. This is clearly true for most issues in the field of domestic politics (e.g. alliances with non-Islamists, participation in autocratic governments) and economics. Nonetheless, it is less clear in the field of

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foreign policy, shown by their adamant and continuing opposition to the peace treaty with Israel.<sup>9</sup>

In all official party platforms (1989, 1993, 2003, 2007) the existence of Israel and any moves to make peace with it have been rejected based on the belief that the land of Palestine is an Islamic trust. Therefore, the JMB and the IAF have criticized and denounced all meetings, negotiations, and agreements, especially the so-called Wadi Araba Treaty between Jordan and Israel.<sup>10</sup> Together with the professional associations, the IAF leads the strong ‘anti-normalization’ movement, which consistently opposes any opening to Israel under current conditions: “We call the project of creating normal peace the project of surrender.”<sup>11</sup> The most recent IAF party platform reinforced this position indicating that: “We believe that the Palestinian land from the sea to the river belongs to the Arab and Islamic nation completely.”<sup>12</sup> It should be stated here, that the Wadi Araba Treaty is also rejected by large segments of the Jordanian population.

#### **Diversity within the Movement: Pragmatism versus Ideology**

Talking to different leading members of the IAF reveals a much more diverse picture of positions regarding the Middle East conflict. While some members emphasize the religious component of the party’s relation to Israel, others tend to very explicitly stress the political component of the Middle East conflict and rarely use religious arguments.

Contrary to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, it is unlikely that the IAF will gain comparable political influence through the Jordanian parliament or government in the foreseeable future. However, similar to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the JMB and its political arm, the IAF, have been influenced not only by its ideology but also by the political circumstances, to which it has at times reacted in a pragmatic way. Given its current limited influence in regional politics and the fact that the IAF is not a key political actor in the Middle East conflict, its positions vis-à-vis the conflict are especially responsive to the broader political context. Therefore, the IAF is not likely to act as a spoiler to the Middle East peace process if there is some serious progress in the negotiations.

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### **The Case of Iran: Regional rather than Religious Actor**

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Iran, as a state actor in the region, cannot be considered simply from the angle of religious fundamentalism, but, crucially, in terms of geopolitics and ideology. There are, of course, many different kinds of ‘fundamentalists’ in Iran, not always agreeing on matters of religion, law, and society. However, the question of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not part of their contentions, as they probably agree on antipathy to Israel and sympathy with the Palestinians. Yet, considerable sectors of the population, possibly a majority, are indifferent to religion: many studies and observations find Iranians to be much less pious than their Arab or Turkish neighbors. Apathy or opposition towards the regime may even react against the constant anti-American and anti-Israeli mantra of regime propaganda. The young, urban population, in particular, seems to identify with the cultural icons of America and the West.

#### **Iran’s Shiite Identity**

Iran’s Shiite identity is a crucial factor in its regional strategy. At one level, the ideology of the Islamic Republic is pan-Islamist, proclaiming unity of Muslims and anti-imperialism. It is this element which is at the basis of its earlier attempt to export the revolution to the rest of the region. Iran’s pan-Islamism conflicts with its Shiite identity, an integral element of Iranian culture and nationalism. This sectarian factor was sharpened in the episode of war with Iraq, where a seemingly ‘secular’ Iraqi regime was underpinned by Sunni identity, and overwhelmingly supported by the ‘fundamentalist’ Sunni power of Saudi Arabia and much of the Arab world.

The vociferous Shiite populations of some of these countries and their possible sympathy with Iran, were, and continue to be, seen as a threat and constituted a further reinforcement of the sectarian definitions of regional politics. The championing of the Arab and Islamic cause against Israel then became a central plank in Iran’s drive for power and legitimacy in a predominantly Sunni Arab and Islamic world. The war slogans postulated Karbala and Iraq as stages on the way to Jerusalem. This taunted the Sunni Arab regimes with their failures in the face of Israel, especially





after the peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, as well as the postulated subservience of these countries, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf to American policy, which fostered and protected Israel.

### Iran in a Changing Regional Environment

The alliance with Syria brought Tehran into direct contact with its allies in Lebanon and to the border with Israel, where Hezbollah fighters have been active over the past thirty years. Hezbollah faces similar problems to those of Iran with regard to its Shiite identity. Sentiment with respect to Hezbollah and its Iranian patron has ebbed and flowed in relation to issues and events. What was seen as its successful resistance to Israel's 2006 attack, was the height of Hezbollah's and Iran's appeal in the region, while Hezbollah's armed assertion against the Lebanese government in 2008 heightened sectarian antipathies against it.

Regional developments in the last two years have posed challenges to Iran's power and credibility. One was the regional policy transformation of the AKP (Justice and Development Party) regime in Turkey, which turned on attempts at closer friendly relations with its Arab neighbors and a break with previously close relations to Israel. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan is a much more popular and sympathetic figure for Arab audiences and regimes than Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and he is a Sunni. Iran's credibility is further challenged by its Syrian alliance. Since Iranian propaganda has sought to present the Arab Spring as Islamist revolts similar to the Iranian revolution, and rejected any parallels with its own Green Movement, when Syrian internal hostilities flared up, the revolt had to be presented as American/Israeli conspiracy against a steadfast national power.

Hezbollah is similarly embarrassed, while Hamas seems to be disengaging from Syrian and Iranian patronage. Iran's opportunities in the Arab world are now oriented towards Iraq and its Shiite dominated regime, though it must be pointed out that Iraqi Shiites are highly diverse and fractious in their politics and attitudes to Iran. The increasingly sectarian flavor of the geopolitics of the Middle East and the Gulf as well as the rise of Turkey as a regional power

pose serious challenges to Iran. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict recedes in comparison, but the rhetoric remains intense. It is therefore highly unlikely that Iranian positions on Israel/Palestine and the question of peace negotiations would alter in the foreseeable future – especially the threat of a possible American/Israeli strike against its nuclear facilities even fosters anti-Israeli and anti-Western sentiments in the governing elite. However, regime change is always possible as has been seen in the recent Arab revolts.

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### Christian Zionism in the United States: Strengths and Limitations

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The Christian Zionists' focus on the Jewish settlement of the 'Holy Land' predates the modern Jewish Zionist vision as it emerged in the 19th century. For Christian Zionists, the return of the Jewish people to the 'promised land' is an indispensable step towards the second coming of Christ. They generally play down the fact that this expected event would go along with the destruction of the Jewish people. This aspect is clearly of concern to those aware of the long history of Christian anti-Semitism. At the same time, Christian Zionists are closely aware of the Jewish people's biblical depiction as God's chosen people.

### Christian Zionism and the U.S. Political System

This religious group differs from other forms of religious fundamentalism insofar as its influence is most strongly felt with respect to the policies of the region's (still) most important external power, the United States, rather than those of regional actors. The main addressees of such lobbying are, first, the administration including the president and various departments tasked with executing specific aspects of the American foreign, defense, and national security strategies.

George W. Bush was the first U.S. President who embraced the Christian Right not merely out of political calculus – as did Republican Presidents Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan. Yet, while he was widely perceived as the first genuine supporter of Christian Zionist thinking, he diverged from their more hard-line views on the Middle East on two important aspects. Bush followed President Bill Clinton's emphasis on the peacefulness and

*»Iran cannot be considered simply from the angle of religious fundamentalism, but, crucially, in terms of geopolitics and ideology.«*

contribution to civilization by Islam and Muslims, thus opposing the Christian Zionist dogma which focuses on a construction of Islam as inferior or even threatening. His endorsement of a Palestinian state also set, at least in theory, clear geographical limits to Jewish settlement activities in the West Bank and Gaza.

In addition to directly pressuring the White House, the Christian Zionist lobby also addresses the U.S. Congress to stimulate pressure to help tilt White House policies. One such example has been the increasing outspokenness of conservative members of Congress to challenge U.S. policies that are not deemed to be sufficiently 'pro-Israel.' In fact, recent studies of Congressional voting on U.S. policies towards the Arab-Israeli conflict showed that Christian fundamentalism can increasingly be identified as a statistically significant factor in shaping individual lawmakers' voting decisions on these issues.<sup>13</sup>

#### **Christian Zionism in U.S. Public Opinion**

Christian Zionist viewpoints also influence American public opinion. Surveys provide evidence of a partisan split that reflects the increasing importance of this religious group's views among Republican voters while Democrats are more inclined to favor even-handedness regarding the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. Also, Democrats are more inclined to favor diplomatic means or sanctions over military means to deal with emerging national security threats such as the one posed by Iran's nuclear program.<sup>14</sup> Statistical analysis of general U.S. public opinion has further shown that militant support of Israel is robustly correlated with cognitive dogmatism and the treatment of the Bible as infallible.<sup>15</sup> Other studies have found Christian fundamentalism to correlate with the inclination to see Islam as a religion of violence.<sup>16</sup>

#### **Christian Zionists' Limited Role**

It needs to be highlighted however, that despite Christian Zionist advances, developments in Israel and the broader region carry more importance in driving U.S. policy than the movement's possible influence. If, either through electoral changes or political calculations, the Israeli government decides it to be in its

best national security interest to enter into substantial and meaningful negotiations with the Palestinians and other regional actors, it is difficult to envision a scenario where Christian Zionists will be willing or, if indeed so, strong enough to undermine a U.S. policy that supports the expressed wishes of the Israeli government.

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### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

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Regarding the first guiding question of ideology, constituency, and goals of the respective fundamentalist group, the case studies reveal that religious fundamentalists are not predefined by their religion. Political leaders are after all, largely rational actors, following political calculations and adopting strategic behavior to achieve goals. The political circumstances they encounter are a crucial determinant of their positions and behavior. Thus, their religious doctrines were found to be quite flexible rather than stereotypically rigid.

The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood has, so far, shown a pragmatic attitude with regard to the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty. While supporting the Palestinian cause and criticizing Israeli policy, it understands that Egypt's military and most of the population would balk at the possibility of costly conflict.

However, other fundamentalist groups behave in opposite ways. In this manner, Israeli settlers in the Westbank regard it as their duty to make sure that the Palestinian occupied territories will never turn into a Palestinian state. Notably, these groups are, however, also guided by rational interests and could be contained by local and/or external pressure. Their lack of will to compromise stems especially from the fact that they have the full support of the Israeli government.

The Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood has been rejecting the existence of Israel and the Israeli-Jordanian Peace Treaty. At the same time, it is not a key political actor in the Middle East conflict and it remains unclear, whether these views would still hold true if the Brotherhood were to be part of the Jordanian government. Although not always agreeing on matters of religion, law, and society, the question of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not controversial among the many different kinds of fundamentalists in Iran, agreeing on

*»Contrary to the beliefs of 'essentialists,' pragmatic accommodation is possible in principle. This is owed to the fact that fundamentalist actors are – despite their rhetoric and strongly held religious beliefs – also and sometimes even primarily, interested in gaining or retaining power.«*



antipathy to Israel and sympathy with Palestinians. As a result, it is highly unlikely that Iranian positions on these matters would alter in the foreseeable future. The same can be said of Iran's Lebanese ally, Hezbollah.

The second guiding question of this POLICY BRIEF was concerned with the influence of fundamentalist groups within the Middle East and abroad. The results are ambiguous. In Israel, since the 2005 withdrawal from the Gaza Strip the Jewish settlers enhanced their penetration of the political, military, and judicial establishments, as well as the media. Contrary to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, it is very unlikely that the Islamic Action Front in Jordan will gain comparable political influence through the parliament or other branches of government in the foreseeable future.

Christian Zionists in the United States can increasingly be identified as a statistically significant factor in shaping individual lawmaker's voting in Congress.

However, this does not apply to presidential policy: George W. Bush endorsed a Palestinian state and set, at least in theory, clear geographical limits to Jewish settlement activities in the West Bank and Gaza. In any case, it is difficult to think of circumstances where Christian Zionists would be willing or strong enough to undermine expressed wishes of the Israeli government. However, in sum, religious fundamentalists are not likely to be marginalized as long as public opinion and state leaders remain resistant to change.

The third guiding question of this POLICY BRIEF has been whether religious fundamentalists act as spoilers to the Middle East peace process and whether they are likely to do so for the Middle East Conference. Although the results are mixed, the answers mostly negate this thesis.

With regard to Hezbollah, framing its mission as an obligation required by the dictates of religious orthodoxy, the

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Party of God promotes its struggle as a Lebanese national resistance as well as an Islamic resistance against Israel. Without a land-for-peace deal between Israel, Lebanon, and Syria, Hezbollah is highly likely to remain acting as a spoiler in regional affairs. Similarly, without the establishment of a Palestinian state and a solution to the refugee question, Hamas will probably continue to behave in an obstructive way.

The situation for the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the Freedom and Justice Party is a new and difficult one, having acceded to power and having to balance domestic, regional, and international demands. Iran which is challenged by the increasingly sectarian flavor of regional politics and the rise of Turkey as a regional power, nevertheless keeps up its harsh rhetoric especially towards Israel and the United States. Even more so, it is likely that Tehran will continue using its proxies to challenge Israel. To complete the regional tour d'horizon, we have identified Israeli settler groups in the occupied territories as a major problem to the peace process.

Nonetheless, with local and/or external pressure it might be possible to contain these groups and reduce their influence on Israeli politics.

### Fundamentalist Pragmatism: The Key to Accommodation

We have identified fundamentalist leaders, after all, as largely rational actors, following political calculations and adopting strategic behavior to achieve goals. Gradualism is the name of the political game for (almost) all of the fundamentalist actors.

Contrary to the beliefs of 'essentialists,' pragmatic accommodation is possible in principle. This is owed to the fact that fundamentalist actors are – despite their rhetoric and strongly held religious beliefs – also and sometimes even primarily, interested in gaining or retaining power. Thus, if the right circumstances for negotiation can be produced, intractable beliefs and attitudes could gradually be replaced by an 'interest first' approach that could move the hostile parties towards meaningful dialogue. ■

### About the ACADEMIC PEACE ORCHESTRA MIDDLE EAST (APOME)

The ORCHESTRA is the follow-up project of the "Multilateral Study Group on the Establishment of a Missile Free Zone in the Middle East". The ACADEMIC PEACE ORCHESTRA MIDDLE EAST is a classical Track II initiative: it consists of some 70 experts – mainly from the Middle East/Gulf, one of the most conflict-ridden areas of the world. The ORCHESTRA is meeting regularly in working groups (CHAMBER ORCHESTRA UNITS) on specific topics in the context of a workshop cycle from 2011-2014. The main goal of this initiative is to shape the 2012 Middle East Conference on the establishment of a zone free of weapons of mass destruction and their delivery vehicles agreed upon by the international community in May 2010.

For this reason, these experts develop ideas, concepts, and background information in a series of POLICY BRIEFS which are the results of intense discussions within the CHAMBER ORCHESTRA UNITS. In this framework, the broader normative Cooperative Security Concept will be further developed, embedded, and institutionalized in the region. At the same time, the ORCHESTRA meetings serve as venues for confidence building among the experts. The networking activities of PRIF's Project Group are documented by the ATLAS on Track II research activities in or about the Middle East/Gulf region.

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