Reflections on the Arab-Israeli Conflict

by [Bassam Michael Madany](#) (March 2025)

In the aftermath of World War II, global powers made several changes to the world map. For example, parts of eastern Poland were incorporated into the USSR, and portions of eastern Germany were added to what remained of Poland. In 1946, Britain partitioned the Indian subcontinent into India, East Pakistan, and West Pakistan. This led to terrible upheaval and bloodshed. Many Muslims left India for the new Islamic state, while most Hindus who found themselves in what became Pakistan had to relocate and settle in India.

Eventually, almost all the reshaped and new nations learned to accept their neighbors' existence and borders. Not so in the Middle East, where one situation has defied resolution: Palestinian Israeli coexistence.

In 1946, the United Nations decided to partition Palestine into Arab and Jewish states. The Palestinians and their Arab neighbors opposed the Partition Plan. On May 15, 1948, war broke out between the nascent Jewish state and its Arab neighbors. Since then, several wars have occurred between the antagonists. More than seven decades later, peace in the Holy Land remains elusive.

I have been aware of this unending crisis since my youngest days. One of my earliest recollections was a headline of a Beirut newspaper in 1936 that portrayed a Palestinian, Fawzi al-Qawuqji, leading a rebellion against the British administrators of the Holy Land. He opposed the influx of Jews into Palestine following the tide of anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany.

During the summers of 1943 and 1944, I worked in Syria and Lebanon at camps run by the British Army's RASC (Royal Army Service Corps). My superior was a Jewish sergeant from Tel Aviv; the second-in-command was a Palestinian Christian corporal from Jerusalem, whose brother was a well-known singer on the radio station of the PBC (Palestine Broadcasting Corporation). Both worked together without apparent friction and used to talk about their aspirations and dreams for the future. Occasionally, I wonder what has happened to them since 1948.

I have lived in the United States since 1958, far away from the Middle East. Still, I cannot forget the Palestinian problem since I have interacted with many Palestinians throughout my career. In 1966, while traveling in the Middle East and meeting some of my listeners, I visited two elderly Palestinian Christian sisters who lived near the Augusta Victoria Hospital in Jerusalem. At the time, it was in an area under the control of Jordan. Late in May 1967, I received an airmail from them, telling me about their fears as the war clouds gathered. Hostilities between Egypt and Israel were imminent. Having nowhere else to go, they planned to stay in

their little home. After the end of the Six-Day War, I saw pictures of the awful devastation that took place near the place where the two sisters lived. I never heard from them again.

Then, in June 2001, I received a heart-rending message from a Palestinian Evangelical pastor in the West Bank. He told me of the sad incident that occurred as he and his family were on their way to Jerusalem to attend the graduation of one of their sons. At the checkpoint separating their town from East Jerusalem, the Israeli Army stopped their car. The pastor and his family were not allowed to proceed further. They missed that significant occasion in the life of their son.

Why has this problem persisted, defying all attempts to solve it by well-meaning world leaders? I have not stopped reading and reflecting on this subject. I am convinced that the problem lies in the attempt to isolate this problem from its larger context, which doesn't just involve Palestinians and Israelis; it has to do with the Islamic concept of the world.

The Arab-Islamic worldview divides the world into *Daru'l Islam* (the Household of Islam) and *Daru'l Harb* (the Household of War). Once a specific area became part of the Household of Islam, it had to remain Islamic forever!

I can best explain this view by quoting from Bernard Lewis's book, *The Multiple Identities of the Middle East* (published by Random House, NY, in 1998). This book offers an understanding of the people and politics of the Middle East. One of its main themes is that Middle Easterners identify themselves both ethnically and religiously. However, the religious element is and remains the dominant one. The root for this outlook is embedded in the history of the last 1400 years.

Within the vast Islamic empire, the conquerors classified people according to their religious affiliation. One was either a Muslim or a follower of one of the earlier religions.

Muslims enjoyed all the rights and privileges accorded to them by the Islamic Shari'a Law. As for others, such as Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians, they were given the status of *dhimmis*, i.e., the "*protected ones*." This *"protection"* was actually a mere euphemism as it entailed many restrictions imposed on non-Muslims. Thus, one's identity was not primarily defined by ethnic or geographic factors but by one's religious faith. This classification continues to the present day. A Middle Easterner's primary identity resides in his or her religious faith; secondarily, it is defined by the state within which he or she happens to live.

For example, on my Lebanese Identity Card, I was registered as a Protestant Christian. This way of identifying Middle Easterners creates a crisis whenever relations between the various religiously defined groups are strained. Quite often, Muslims, even though living within a distinct country such as Lebanon, felt that their ultimate identity (and therefore loyalty) resided elsewhere, within the Islamic Ummah (Islamic community). That kind of allegiance practically nullified the *modus vivendi* that had existed in Lebanon since the 1920s, and that led eventually to the loss of freedom in a land that used to be known as the Switzerland of the Middle East.

As Bernard Lewis put it:

> *"During the centuries-long confrontation between the states of Europe and the Ottoman Empire, the Europeans always saw and discussed their relations in terms of Austrians, Frenchmen, Germans, Englishmen, and other nationalities versus Turks; the Turks saw it in terms of Muslims versus Christians. In pre-modern Muslim writings, the parochial subdivisions of Christendom are given scant importance. In the worldview of Muslims, which they naturally also ascribed to others, religion was the determinant factor of identity, the focus of loyalty and, not less important, the*

source of authority.” (p.22)

In these words, we notice how the religious factor is of utmost importance in our relations with the Middle East or any nations within the vast Islamic world that surrounds it. Secular Western writers tend to ignore the critical importance of religion in Islam and what constitutes a Muslim’s ultimate loyalty. They tend to forget the fact that, in contrast with Christianity, *Islam is an amalgam of religion, politics, and culture in one indivisible entity.* If this thesis is correct, and I believe that the history of the last 1400 years supports it, then why do some writers and politicians continue to ignore this fundamental fact about Islam? Islam is more than a religion and has maintained an exclusivist political worldview. It has no room for non-Muslim entities (i.e., states) to freely exist within the context of the Household of Islam.

Back to the book of Bernard Lewis:

> *“In the modern world, the political role of Islam, internationally as well as domestically, differs significantly from that of its peer and rival, Christianity. The heads of state or ministers of foreign affairs of the Scandinavian countries and Germany do not from time to time foregather in a Lutheran summit conference. Nor was it customary, when the Soviet Union still existed, for its rulers to join with those of Greece and Yugoslavia and, temporarily forgetting their political and ideological differences, to hold regular meetings on the basis of their current or previous adherence to the Orthodox Church. Similarly, the Buddhist nations of East and Southeast Asia, the Catholic nations of southern Europe and South America, do not constitute Buddhist or Catholic*

blocs at the United Nations, nor for that matter in any other political activities.

"The very idea of such a grouping, based on religious identity, might seem to many modern Western observers absurd or even comic. But it is neither absurd nor comic in relation to Islam. Some fifty-five Muslim governments, including monarchies and republics, conservatives and revolutionaries, practitioners of capitalism and disciples of various kinds of socialism, friends and enemies of the United States, and exponents of whole spectrum of shades of neutrality, have built an elaborate apparatus of international consultation and even, on some issues, of cooperation. They hold regular high-level conferences, and, despite differences of structure, ideology, and policy, have achieved a significant measure of agreement and common action." (p.26)

In the Palestinian Israeli problem, we must recognize that the basic identity of a Palestinian Muslim is his religion. And since his religion has supplanted both Judaism and Christianity, neither of these faiths possesses any legitimate claim to the land of Palestine. The underlying problem is theological; thus, it remains radically different from all other international problems.

The secularized West cannot comprehend this basic religious motif for the Palestinians' refusal to accept Israel as a valid political entity within the vast Islamic world. It is up to Christians to speak boldly about this subject and to point out to all parties in this conflict that genuine coexistence in our globalized world is a must. The continual refusal to accept the existence of Israel as a sovereign state leads to more violence and acts of terrorism that spill beyond the borders of the Holy Land.

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Bassam Michael Madany is an Eastern Christian living freely in the West where he enjoys the freedom to express his views and convictions. He believes in the right of every human being to live without fear of persecution on account of his or her beliefs. Having lived in his formative years in the Levant during the French Mandate, he benefited from studying at French Institutions, thus giving him the opportunity to have a window to the Western Civilization which is founded on the heritage of Jerusalem, Athens, and Rome. He is very concerned about the conditions that Eastern Christians face, due the rise of Islamism that seeks to erase the history and the presence of the original inhabitants of the Middle East.

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