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**Conflicting futures in Palestine**

The politics of Palestine can be viewed through many different lenses – religious, political, historical, etc. As a rather typical product of the Pakistani school system, my knowledge of the beliefs held by followers of religions other than Islam has been very limited, but I want to try and offer an eschatological lens through which to understand ongoing events in Palestine.

Technically, that makes this too a religious perspective, but unlike many religious explanations that look to the past, I am going to try to explain today’s actions in terms of end-times prophecies of the three Abrahamic religions. The religious explanations offered by common clerics of neighborhood mosques seldom venture beyond “because-they-hate-us” or “it-is-a-conspiracy” – neither of which is helpful.

Let me begin closest to home. Islamic eschatology foretells the appearance of the Dajjal, the anti-Christ or false messiah, who will be blind in one eye. He will attempt to lead the faithful astray but will be challenged and defeated by the returning Hazrat Isa (a.s.). The end times will also see the release of Gog and Magog (Yajooj and Majooj). Hazrat Isa and Imam Mahdi will pray for their defeat and Gog and Magog will be vanquished by God. Hazrat Isa (a.s.) will live out the remainder of his life on Earth, which will be followed by a civilizational decline, followed by a number of signs, followed by the eventual end of the world. Some details vary between sects but generally it is not a vision of the future that Muslims are actively seeking to achieve.

In Judaism, however, the literary interpretation of events leading up to the end times is one that many Jews actively seek. It begins with the return of the Jewish people to Palestine. Jews see the founding of modern-day Israel as a fulfillment of this prophecy. This is to be followed by the rebuilding of Solomon’s Temple on the Temple Mount, where the Al-Aqsa Mosque presently stands, all part of a belief called Zionism. This is where we find ourselves and this is where it gets interesting.

I find a little bit of background noise helpful while studying. During my early years in grad school in the US, I lived without a cable TV subscription, and the only TV channels I got were local. At night, that meant having to choose from mostly a number of network channels airing paid content and infomercials. One exception was TCT, one of many Evangelical Christian television channels. The programming on this and similar channels provides an educational and unvarnished look at contemporary beliefs of the American-evangelical Right, an important and influential electorate in American politics.

Christian eschatology holds a diversity of views and interpretations, and it is not possible for a layperson like myself to try to cover them all here. For this reason, I am going to restrict myself to the literal interpretation subscribed to by a large segment of Evangelical Christians. Like many Zionist Jews, they too believe that the next events to occur is the return of the Jewish people to Israel and the rebuilding of Solomon’s Temple, a belief called Christian Zionism.

In this way, there is a temporary confluence of eschatological views of large, politically engaged segments of both, Jewish and Christian communities. This also explains the large portion of pro-Israeli content on American Christian faith-based TV channels. Christian Zionism’s support for Israel runs so deep that there are fundraising programmes to pay for the cost of ‘returning’ Jews from around the world to Israel. This segment of Christians believes in actively working towards the fulfilment of prophesied events that will take humanity closer to the end-times.

One way to understand the dehumanizing treatment of Palestinians by the Israeli apartheid state is certainty of belief in literal interpretations of prophecies of scripture. These actions are being supported by the US where Evangelical Christians have been a powerful voting block since the 70s, all the way through today, led by well-known names like the late Billy Graham, the late Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and many others. No American politician, Democrat or Republican, can afford to alienate or offend this group of voters.

However, the agreement on prophesied events in Christianity and Judaism is temporary and diverges after the rebuilding of the Temple. Jews believe that this will be followed by the rise of a Jewish messiah from the House of David, ushering in the Messianic age, an era of peace and justice. All nations will recognize the God of Israel as the one true God. Eventually, God will resurrect the dead and create a new heaven.

Christians on the other hand believe that the rebuilding of the Temple will be followed by the Second Coming of Jesus (Hazrat Isa). At that time, they believe, Jews will recognize their mistaken beliefs and a large majority of them will convert to Christianity. Other events to happen at around the same time are the Rapture, the lifting of all true believers to heaven, a thousand-year rule of peace on Earth, followed by the final judgment and life in the hereafter.

It is important to remember that the above does not and cannot describe the beliefs of all Jews or all Christians. The Christian and Jewish communities are no more monolithic than the Muslim community. Where there are people that take prophecies of the end-times literally, there are many others who subscribe to more metaphorical interpretations. Even as the IDF was bombing Gaza, there were Jewish people around the world, even in Jerusalem, that put humanist values and common sense above blind belief in vague predictions.

While the US government’s support for Israeli apartheid does not seem to be waning any time soon, there is a gradual shifting of the political ground that gives some reason for hope. According to survey data from 2003 to 2017, the segment of the American population that identifies itself as Protestant (which includes Evangelicals) has been on a steady decline, from 50 percent down to 36 percent. Over the same period, religiously unaffiliated people have grown from 12 percent to 21 percent of the population. According to some projections, if current trends persist, both groups could comprise an equal 35 percent of the population by 2035. This would be a dramatic shift in religious demographics and could force the US government to re-evaluate its present unconditional support to Israeli war crimes and instead start holding it to the same yardsticks of civilized behavior it routinely demands of other countries.

Those changes are already making themselves felt. American support for Israel used to enjoy equal bipartisan support in Congress. However, a growing number of a new generation of elected Democratic representatives (like Rep Ilhan Omar, Rep Rashida Tlaib, Rep Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rep Ayanna Pressley) and not so new representatives (like Sen Bernie Sanders, Sen Chris Van Hollen) are increasingly questioning and challenging that support. Liberal Democrats have been taking on their own party’s president Biden after he made the oft-repeated statement that Israel has the right to defend itself.

Some of these changing attitudes of the American (and global) public must be credited to continuous messaging that has brought increased awareness and education on social justice issues. In 2013 the council of Native and Indigenous Studies Association (NAISA) issued a declaration in support of the global academic and cultural boycott of Israeli institutions. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, made up of, and supported in large part by, young people, stands against the lingering legacy of slavery and racism in America. Standing for social justice at home but denying Palestinians the same would take a special kind of cognitive dissonance. That is why more Americans that understand the injustices visited upon Native American and African-Americans can see Israel’s oppression and slow ethnic cleansing for what it is.

The ubiquitous access to cameras and publishing platforms is making it increasingly difficult for Israel to sell its fictional narrative to whitewash its abuses. We may be living in the era of fake news, but there are limits to the degree to which the torrent of pictures and videos coming out of Palestine can be spun. In the meantime, governments supporting Israeli crimes have to decide whether we are going to live in a world that strives for the attainment of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for every human being or one where state-terror and subjugation of people in the name of regressive ideas like manifest destiny and religious supremacism are acceptable.

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