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## **How Messianism is Killing Israelis and Palestinians**

*By Reuven Firestone*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*In the past four months, we have witnessed the petrification of two already rigid and competing narratives – one held by most Jewish Israelis and Jews in general, the other by most Palestinians and Muslims in general. They conceal the truth of a complicated reality and have caused great suffering, thousands of deaths, and tens of thousands of displaced persons among both Israelis and Palestinians.*

### **COMMENTARY**

Messianic yearning exists in all the scriptural religions. It offers hope and optimism that, with God's help, the world will one day find a solution for its suffering and finally experience peace. But when the messianic urge moves from aspiration to application, it ends badly.

Activist messianism is born of failure and overwhelming despair, like a "hail Mary" pass when nothing else has worked. This kind of messianism lies behind the behaviours of many influential activists on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and has a much more profound impact than has been imagined.

### **Messianic Impulse**

The Settler Movement is steering the messianic impulse on the Israeli side. According to their worldview, there was a time when God showed favour to the Jews, God's chosen people, and enabled self-rule in their own land. But as they strayed from God's way, God responded with increasing rebuke which eventually led to the destruction of independent Jewish sovereignty, exile, and dispersion.

Jews repeatedly failed to regain God's favour through the centuries. Finally, shortly after the Holocaust, God offered a new chance for redemption through the

establishment of the State of Israel, but only if the Jewish collective would demonstrate their devotion by resettling all the land promised to them in the Bible.

The supposed truth of this scenario is discernible through a series of signs that could only have occurred because they reflect the will of God: the Balfour Declaration, the greening of the deserts, the establishment of the State of Israel, the miraculous victory of the Six-Day War that brought all the biblical Promised Land under Jewish rule, the divine rebuke in the near-failure of the Yom Kippur War for failing to settle that Land.

These are read as tarot-like indications of the messianic redemption near at hand – the *ikveta demeshikha* – “footsteps of the messiah” that should be obvious to all authentic Jews. Only when Jews occupy all the Land of Israel will suffering cease, and only the removal of idolatry (some would say, non-Jews) from the sacred Land of Israel will convince the Almighty that the Jewish people is worthy of full redemption.

### **Expression of Muslim Messianism**

On the Palestinian side, Hamas is one of several modern expressions of Muslim messianism. According to this messianic narrative, there was a time in ancient days when God showed favour to those Muslims who truly dedicated themselves to serve him. This was the age of the great Caliphates and Muslim control of most of the known world, when the world’s greatest and most successful science, letters, philosophy, exploration, and ethical rule were driven by Muslim thinkers and leaders.

But Muslims fell away from true faith and dedication to God as they became lax in ensuring proper belief and right behaviour. The result was the loss of divine favour and providence that lay behind their sovereignty and extraordinary success. God’s favour can be regained only when Muslims right the wrongs of the past through pious behaviour and activism – striving in God’s path to revive divine love as during the days of the Prophet.

While some current revivalist movements sanction piety through prayer and devotion, the West is most familiar with the jihadi expressions of messianic revival that demonstrate their dedication through fighting the enemies of Islam. Hamas, like al-Qaeda and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), strives to reestablish Muslim dominion over most of the world. Each of these organisations has a different approach to the same purpose. Hamas’ goal is to reestablish pure Muslim sovereignty over all of Palestine from “the river to the sea”. Their zealous effort is intended to prove to God their worthiness of divine favour, which will enable the reestablishment of Muslim world hegemony and a return to ancient days of glory.

### **When Reason Fails, Fantasy Takes Over**

These messianic expressions have existed for decades yet had little influence when the conflicting parties negotiated through the usual means of modern politics and conventional war. But when the conflict dragged on and felt more and more intractable, the messianic impulse grew as frustration and hopelessness increased.

It appears in different forms on each side, but it has the same ultimate goal – to restore the glory of an ancient past, a past that never actually existed. And it is absolute and

tolerates no compromise, driven by acute despair and false narratives that misrepresent reality. When reason fails to solve real problems, fantasy and exaggeration quickly move in to replace it. Both the Settler Movement and Hamas are expressions of fantasy – and despair. They are born from the failures of reasonable people to resolve difficult issues.

Messianic activist movements never succeed. And when they implode, they destroy countless lives in the process. There is no happy ending for the contest between two conflicting messianic movements. True progress requires that the parties transcend their standard narratives, reject the fantasies, try seeing the world for its complexity, and open up to empathy for the suffering and affliction of the other.

### **Path of Hope**

The only path of hope is a third way, a return to a sober, human scale effort by two peoples with claims to the same land to negotiate an arrangement whereby both can live with political sovereignty, security, economic viability, and dignity. That is finally experiencing peace.

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