Secularism and the Religious Shift in Palestinian Chicago: Implications for Solidarity and Activism

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ABSTRACT
This article analyzes transformations in Palestinian secularism, specifically in Chicago, Illinois, in response to the weakening of the Palestine Liberation Organization and the emergence of Islamic reformist structures since the late 1980s. Up until then, secular community organizations that aligned with the secular-oriented Palestinian political factions constituted the ideological center of this community. Beginning in the late 1980s, however, a discernible religious shift began to take place. The analysis draws from extensive fieldwork (2010–15) to show how secularism has not disappeared but rather transmuted into new, often hybrid forms whose lack of institutionalization reflect the attenuation of secularist structures and orientations. The weakening of the secularist milieu leaves individuals who have become disenchanted with the religious-sectarian shift (at the time of the fieldwork) with few alternatives for social connection, solidarity, and action. They forge their own idiosyncratic paths as a result.

This Article Analyzes transformations in Palestinian secularism in the diaspora context from the 1990s to the present day. The period in question witnessed the rise of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas), the start of the now-moribund Oslo peace process, and the gradual atrophy of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which together provoked a crisis in the dominant secular-nationalist framework of Palestinian politics and a concomitant fracturing of Palestinian political solidarity and identity. A primary factor in this transformation was the revivification of Islamic political movement structures and piety as powerful, competing frameworks for social cohesion and activism. This revivification, as the discussion will note further below, appropriated narratives, symbols, and structures (such as the Muslim Brotherhood's) going back to the Mandate era (1923–48). A multitude of studies have addressed the historical, political, and regional conditions from which this phenomenon emerged. The causes they point to include the strategic failures of the Fatah-led PLO leadership, especially on account of the Oslo process; Muslim Brotherhood (MB) activism to counter secularism and PLO dominance in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt), especially Gaza; Israel's active cultivation of Islamist movements as a counterweight to the PLO; the sectarianizing effects, regionally, of the 2003 U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq and Washington's long-standing support for the Saudi regime; the collapse of the Soviet Union as a counterweight to the United States; the cultural and political force of the wider sahwa islamiyya (“Islamic awakening”) in the Arab world and beyond; and the corresponding disillusionment with Pan-Arabism and the military-led regimes that espoused it.

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My research has drawn on this broad, contextual literature to look at the Islamic revivification's specific effects on identity and cohesion among Palestinians, both in the oPt and in diaspora communities like that of Chicago. One of the key findings of my earlier work, focusing on the West Bank and Gaza Strip, was that Islamic-secularist competition did not institute a simple secular-religious binary; rather, it produced a complex, multidirectional, and hybridized range of identity articulations that spanned both religious and secular social and political milieus. Secularism transmuted rather than simply weakened or disappeared. The research I present here shows a similar process of religious revivification and identity reconfiguration arising out of the Islamic revival in the Middle East, and specifically in Palestine, as well as the racist reaction to immigrant communities in the United States and the law enforcement interventions targeting them in the wake of 9/11. The specific conditions pertaining to the Chicago transformation include processes of reformist Islamic institution building in Palestinian immigrant communities there and a corresponding deinstitutionalization of secular activist structures as a result of the PLO's decline post Oslo. Islamic reformism, in this context, refers to intellectual and political currents that reorient Muslims toward a contemporary form of orthopraxy emphasizing foundational textual sources and the exemplary piety of the first three generations of Muslims. Globally, Islamic reformism characterizes the ideological orientations of a broad range of movements and outlooks, including but not limited to Islamist (political Islamic) ones. While diaspora contexts reveal a continuity in terms of the religious-secular dynamics to which Islamic reformism gave rise in the oPt, they also show a range of unique identity trajectories stemming from the interface of the religious shift with diaspora-specific conditions. The study of diaspora settings, therefore, deepens and nuances our understanding of the religious shift and its implications, especially for secularism and for the forms of activism its institutions have cultivated.

This article focuses on the Palestinian immigrant community in Chicago as a case study on the effects of the religious shift on secularism in the diaspora. At approximately eighty-five thousand strong, this community constitutes one of the largest and most politically active concentrations of Palestinians in North America. Prior to the 1980s, secular community organizations that aligned with the PLO factions and with politically Left and pan-Arab nationalist currents constituted the ideological center of Palestinian Chicago. Beginning in the late 1980s, however, a discernible change began to take place. Noting that she had "personally observed hundreds of individuals change from secular to religious since the mid-1990s, while conducting research and participating in the Arab and Muslim communities [in Chicago]," Louise Cainkar wrote about the appearance of halal meat markets, the shuttering of secular cultural centers, and increasing attendance at mosques and private Islamic schools. She also observed that the largest Palestinian-dominated mosque, the Mosque Foundation in Bridgeview, Illinois, saw its attendance shoot up from seventy-five people in 1982 to nearly two thousand individuals on any given Friday during the mid-2000s.

The discussion that follows analyzes the impact of this religious shift on institutional and individual identities. In doing so, it advances the claim that, despite the mosques’ undeniable dominance and the community's correspondingly widespread embrace of piety-minded orientations and practices, secularism—in the sense of nonsectarian or multisectarian nationalism that has broadly informed the ideological outlook of PLO factions and the individuals associated with, or oriented toward, these groups since the 1960s—has not disappeared. Ideologically secular organizations persist, and they continue to propound secularist orientations, albeit in ways that accommodate the new religiosity. Palestinian secularism as an ideological current
has thus shifted (not evaporated), historically, flowing in new directions in response to the Islamist movements that have transformed the ideological and organizational bases of collective identity and action. Moreover, to the extent that it embraces and addresses the Palestinian national predicament and cause, the religious shift itself bears the marks of secularism: in other words, secularism persists precisely through its impact on the religious shift. New types of secularity have also emerged, often in deinstitutionalized, individualized, and hybridized forms. In many instances, they manifest as reactions against the new religiosity of the suburban immigrant enclave. In each instance, activism has taken new forms that depart substantially from earlier PLO-aligned orientations.

To substantiate the above claim, the discussion will focus on two organizations that represent and anchor the community's secularist and Islamic milieus, respectively. The first organization, the Arab American Action Network (AAAN), is a grant-funded social service organization that replaced the Arab Community Center (ACC, or, simply, the *markaz*) in the late 1990s. Founded on Chicago's Southwest Side in the 1970s, the *markaz* had served as the primary (secular) institution devoted, historically, to pan-Arab and third world solidarity and progressive-left activism on behalf of Palestine. It was a vibrant space for these activities and served as an important mechanism for recruiting and training activists. The AAAN has subsequently continued this role alongside its social service work, even as the wider community has migrated to the suburbs. Activists, in fact, continue to refer to the AAAN as the *markaz*, acknowledging, in doing so, the continuity of this space with its predecessor. The AAAN is a cofounder of the U.S. Palestinian Community Network (USPCN) and continues to play a central leadership role for Palestinian solidarity networks locally in Chicago. The discussion of the AAAN in this article will highlight how the organization has reconfigured its secularism (historically grounded in politically Left Pan-Arabism, as well as the nonsectarian or multi-sectarian nationalism that has typified the PLO since the 1960s) in response to the new piety and to the prominence of the mosques and of Islam-oriented advocacy structures in the community.

Established in the Chicago suburbs during the mid-2000s, the second organization, American Muslims for Palestine (AMP), hosts the largest annual convention in support of Palestinian national and human rights in the United States. This conference draws thousands of participants from across the country and features leading Palestinian academics and activists, religious and secular, among its lineup of speakers. It has member chapters in multiple states and recently created an advocacy office in Washington. AMP’s emergence reflects the rise in prominence of Islamic frames of reference for Palestinian identity and political activism in the U.S. diaspora. The discussion below will highlight the 2013 conference as a way to show, however, that AMP’s activism ironically secularizes Islam, at least partially, by centering the Palestinian national predicament as the necessary core concern of all Muslims. This outcome underscores, I argue, a persisting secularity within the Palestinian national imaginary—a secularity that characterizes modern nationalism and nation-state political order, generally. It also reflects how Palestine has become a universalized symbol of diverse struggles for justice in different parts of the world. With that said, the partial secularization of Islam in AMP’s discourse does not cancel out the effects of the religious shift; rather, AMP’s Islam-oriented nationalism represents a discursive and symbolic religious-secular amalgam—a religious inflection, not an elision, of secularism—which changes how individuals see themselves as Palestinians.
Additionally, the discussion draws on in-depth life-history interviews with two women of Muslim and Christian backgrounds, respectively. I include a Christian voice because of the importance of the Christian minority in Palestinian society, historically, and because Christians in Palestine as well as in the Chicago diaspora community have witnessed a religious-sectarian shift of their own in response to increasing Islamization and weakening secularism. In Chicago, as in Palestine, Christians and Muslims tend to live in separate yet symbiotically connected communities. Churches and social clubs have constituted the primary institutions of Christian Palestinian life in the Chicago area. Still, even though they inhabit distinct spaces in the city, some Christians maintain businesses in predominantly Muslim suburban areas. Also, a small number of politically active Christians have been occasionally involved in the secular-nationalist community centers, although their participation has declined as these centers have closed and given way to groups like AMP.

The two individuals whom I profile exemplify, through their unique trajectories, the emergence of alternative secularities beyond organizational settings, both religious and secular. They also show how secularism transmutes in reaction against the new religiosity. The purpose of featuring these narratives is to demonstrate the current fluidity of “secular” and “religious,” and also of “Muslim” and “Christian,” as categories within individual subjectivities. In Chicago, as in Palestine, the Islamic revivification has not only sectarianized solidarity structures but also produced dynamic hybridizations of identity that illustrate the impossibility, in practice, of maintaining a stable secular-religious or, indeed, even a Christian-Muslim binary.

These data—the observations and interviews selectively presented in this article—draw from extensive fieldwork carried out between 2010 and 2015. Supported in part by two National Endowment for the Humanities grants, the research generated more than eighty unstructured life-story interviews lasting 120 minutes on average and, in some cases, involving follow-up conversations of equal length. Interviewees were divided equally between those with secular versus religious orientations and included activists as well as people with only tangential connections to political organizing milieus. They spanned the age range from early twenties to mid-eighties and encompassed thirty-five women and forty-five men, the majority of them U.S. citizens. The research also entailed dozens of site observations at mosques, community centers, churches, and public protest actions. The foundation for this fieldwork rested on my relationships with community leaders forged during the 1990s, as well as on prior research in the oPt. Institutional Review Board approval (IRB #09F030) was secured for every year of fieldwork. The protocols mandated verbal consent for interviews. These were recorded digitally at the start of every interview following explanation of the consent process and of anonymity protections. Publications based on these data have obscured interviewees’ identities by using pseudonyms and changing personal details. The handful of interviewees named directly were given a transcript of their interviews in order to check for factual errors and then asked to provide written permission to use their real names. Real names were also used for publicly known figures, sites, and organizations.

**Defining Secularism**

I use “secularism” as an ideal type to encompass any social orientation, practice, mode of solidarity, or stance that implicitly or explicitly resists, rejects, demotes, ignores, or otherwise suspends—momentarily or permanently—the prior claim of religious authority. Secularist
stances manifest empirically in a range of forms. What ultimately makes an orientation or stance or mode of response “secular,” however, is the explicit rejection, implicit irrelevance, or suspension of the primacy of a particular religious authority above all other considerations as a foundation for shared ethics and social and political identification. For example, secular nationalism in the Palestinian context is secular to the extent it privileges national solidarity above specific sectarian religious identities. It is possible nevertheless to adhere to a religious tradition while also adopting a secular—but not necessarily secularist—stance in social or political spheres beyond the specific religious community. Doing so entails a strategic suspending or an interpretive recasting of the priority of religious solidarity.

The central defining feature of Palestinian secularism, historically, has been an emphasis on the nation and its collective search for independence and statehood. Secularism in this sense emphasizes a common identity rooted in a shared language (Arabic), shared customs and traditions (the ‘adat wa taqalid that structured traditional life in Palestine), and a shared homeland, the boundaries of which accord with the borders of the former British Mandate for Palestine. Historically, Palestinian secularism has also affirmed diverse religious identities as inherent to the cultural mosaic and heritage of the Palestinian people. In doing so, it has hearkened to historical memories of symbiotic, intercommunal cooperation in mixed Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities during and after the Ottoman period, as well as to the inter-sectarian collaboration evident in the incipient Palestinian nationalism of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries: instances of what Ussama Makdisi has aptly termed “the ecumenical frame” for imagining a structure of equality within a shared polity comprising Muslims, Christians, and Jews. The Muslim-Christian Association in Jaffa, in which Christians constituted a significant part of the membership, exemplified this kind of framework. The Arab nationalist poetry of writers like Iskander al-Khouri al-Beit Jali, a Christian intellectual from the town of Bayt Jala, located to the west of Bethlehem, captured the ethos and sentiment of its cooperative spirit in the assertion that “there are among us neither Christian nor Muslim / We are one! / Let them know our religion is our homeland! / Let them understand we are Arabs!”

Such sentiments, along with actual historical cooperation and the concomitant sense of shared belonging to town and region, demonstrated the plasticity of sectarian affiliations among Palestinians. Palestinian secularism, in the effort to cohere national solidarity in the aftermath of the catastrophe of 1948, drew on this inter-sectarian ethos and the ideals of a shared Palestinian Arab identity it had instituted. The core organizational structures of this secularism became and have remained the various PLO factions—the Palestinian National Liberation Movement (Fatah); the Movement of Arab Nationalists, which, after 1967, became the Marxist-Leninist-oriented Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP); and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine—and the Communist Party. These structures have gone into relative abeyance since the formation of the Palestinian Authority (PA), created under the aegis of the Oslo Accords.

**Hybridity and Syncretic Secularity**

As I show, secularism and religion constitute a spectrum of possible stances that individuals can adopt toward their lived conditions. A range of factors—for example, ethnicity/race, class, gender, and generation—interrelate with and shape these contrasting perspectives in various
ways. Hybrid positions are possible. My use of “hybrid” departs from postcolonial and postmodernist conceptions of the term. In postcolonial literature, hybridity features typically in arguments about how the subaltern’s subjectivity is not simply the consequence of the imposition of hegemonic colonialist discourses. Rather, the subaltern selectively appropriates and reinterprets hegemonic discourses to produce a hybrid consciousness and knowledge.¹⁸

By contrast, in my broader use of the term, hybridity is less a sign and consequence of colonial power imbalances than a description of what happens to religious and secular orientations through the crossing of social circles. With Georg Simmel and Max Weber, I conceive of modern societies as comprising multiple institutional spaces and sociomoral milieus. As individuals cross into and out of these various spaces, they encounter contradictions and tensions that challenge their value orientations.¹⁹ One consequence of this experience is the development of reflexivity within the individual that can then lead to a process of autobiographical revision and moral reorientation. This process can entail a selective adaptation and integration—a hybridization—of orientations that serves to resolve the tensions, or “cross pressures,” which individuals can experience in negotiating moral contradictions across different social and institutional contexts.²⁰ When the hybridization involves religious-secular intersection, the result is a “syncretic secularity.”²¹

My engagement with questions of hybridity, syncretic formations, and interaction within and across secular and religious spaces draws on but also departs from much of the current debate about secularism. This debate concerns itself primarily with the modern state and with a general political logic of secularism that uniformly defines and regulates the space of the religious and the secular across different national contexts. It also addresses the Western European origins of the idea of the secular as it emerges from “breaks between Christian and secular life in which words and practices were rearranged, and new discursive grammars replaced previous ones.”²² As important as these interventions have been, my concern lies with the continuously dynamic effects of intersecting secular and religious trajectories in the ethnographic present. This focus stems from the particular questions I am asking in relation to the Palestinian diaspora today, as well as from my view of modern states and societies as internally complex and changing: the various bureaucratic structures of the modern state interact, often at cross-purposes, with diverse nonstate institutions (including religious ones), class and generation formations, social and political movements, and cultural enclaves and milieus that exist independently of each other within a wider field of political and social tension. This field of tension can take many forms in relation to diverging cultural and national settings. Within and across these fields, secular and religious discourses, practices, and institutions can develop in multiple, indeterminate directions. In doing so, they give rise to a range of subjectivities, including hybrid ones.

The data I analyze, in particular, provide a detailed demonstration of the key point that “the religious and the secular exist . . . in a continuing dialectic that engender[s] any number of transformations.”²³ In fact, the interactions between the religious and the secular generate dynamic, synthetic forms, making it difficult to maintain the distinction between the two; even if the distinction is useful for analytical purposes, it nevertheless becomes a fluid line within lived realities. Palestinians have participated in this indeterminate, interactive process, just as has every other group globally. Consequently, Palestinian experience offers perspective on the diverse range of what Saba Mahmood terms “conceptions of the self, agency, and accountability that modern secularism makes possible [and] which link ‘us’ and ‘them’ indelibly
Mahmood has in mind primarily political secularism—secularism as state policy—whereas my ideal-typical elaboration of the term focuses on secularism as a particular kind of subjectivity or agency, that is, as a “conception of self” articulated and practiced by particular groups and individuals arrayed across class, gender, generational, religious, racial, political, and spatial spectrums. These self-conceptions may or may not track with the secularizing policies and secularist political values of any given state, society, or milieu. Thus, what emerges is a multiplicity of ways to express and enact secularity. There are multiple secularisms and secularities, not a simple “modern secularism.”

Markaz Secularism in the Chicago Diaspora: The ACC and AAAN

In the aftermath of the 1967 war, activists in Chicago and elsewhere in the United States created new community centers aligning with a resurgent Palestinian nationalism. Musa (pseudonym), Khairy Abudayyeh, and Ali Hussain, founders of key community organizations, each cited the intensification of nationalist sentiment as their motivation to become organizers. Musa became a leader in organizations that leaned ideologically toward Fatah, the main PLO faction. He also helped start the Chicago chapter of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC). Abudayyeh and Hussain, along with a third individual, Samir Odeh, all of whom leaned toward Arab nationalist and left-progressive movements, collaborated with other activists, including women, to launch the ACC (known still as “the markaz”) in 1972. The ACC’s activities included instruction in the Arabic language, in Arab and Palestinian history and politics, and in practices like tatriz (traditional embroidery) and dabka (village line dancing) that had become symbols of Palestinian identity. These organizations and their activities generated a sense of national cohesion within the Chicago immigrant community, thereby marking a distinctive Palestinian and Arab presence in the city’s Southwest Side. This cohesion entailed a suppression of sectarian loyalties. “Back then we didn’t ask about religion,” remarked Musa. “We saw ourselves as Palestinians.”

Since the Oslo peace process (1993 to the present), however, secular nationalist structures have weakened, leading to a generational shift in the expression of secularist orientations. The primary cause of this transformation had been the hollowing out of the PLO as a framework for organizing and orienting the diaspora politically. The weakening arguably began with the Israeli military’s onslaught against the PLO in Lebanon in 1982, an event that led to brutal attacks on Palestinian refugee camps (demonstrating the PLO’s incapacity to provide protection) and to the expulsion of the PLO’s cadres to Tunisia. The weakening deepened further during the first Gulf War (1990–91), when Gulf countries cut financial support for the organization. The creation of the Fatah-controlled PA under Oslo diminished the PLO still more, and the deinstitutionalization of secularism in diaspora communities like Chicago soon followed. In 1991, a fire gutted the building in which the Fatah-leaning Palestinian Community Center was situated. The center’s leadership never rebuilt it. A second center associated with one of Fatah’s competing factions also closed at the same time. A year later, the ACC sealed its doors. Even though the AAAN would soon replace the ACC, secular deinstitutionalization and the rise of Islamic religious organizations in the southwest suburbs had become decisive. Individuals committed to Palestinian liberation would participate in the new Islamic
institutions, but the religious structures would not have the same inter-sectarian ethos as the community centers in the former Chicago Lawn enclave.

The events leading to these changes at the local level were complex. They included the demographic transition to, and concurrent religious institutionalization within, nearby southwest suburban communities like Bridgeview beginning in the latter half of the 1980s. Hussain, Musa, and Abudayyeh pointed to an additional factor: the inability of the Oslo process to produce an independent Palestinian state, which created a perception that the PLO had betrayed the cause of liberation and statehood. Abudayyeh recalled: “The religious fanatics started saying to us, ‘Your cause is useless! See what nationalism did to you! See what communism did to you! See what Arafat did to you!’ We didn’t have an answer. We lost our entire base.”

Such comments reflected the fact that the PLO had essentially abandoned the armed struggle in its bid to enter into a negotiated peace process with the prospect of achieving some semblance of a state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip during the 1990s. Hamas, or factions within it, responding to political isolation and sensing an opportunity, continued to engage in armed attacks on civilian targets, often in reaction to Israeli violence. Their point was unmistakable: the truly committed cadres in Hamas alone could claim the status of standard bearers for the liberation of the homeland. As Abudayyeh noted further, Islam-oriented leaders in Chicago saw an opportunity, as well, to propagate the message that only with a return to Islam would Palestinians, and Muslims globally, recover the “Holy Land,” their national and sacred patrimony.

The new religious orientation seemed to have seeped into the secular milieu itself. Musa commented on how “people start meetings of supposedly secular organizations with “assalamu alaikum” [“peace be upon you”—a typical Islamic salutation], and they pause their activities for prayer. . . . It didn’t used to be like this; this is Saudi stuff.” Whether Saudi influence was indeed at work remained unclear. What was relevant in Musa’s comment, however, was an estrangement from the Islamized present. Marked by piety, even in secular settings, this present had become, in Musa’s view, foreign to a genuinely Palestinian outlook. In public, one should remain Palestinian. To act otherwise divided the nation. Yet, as Musa’s remarks indicated, a younger cohort of secular activists appeared to be at ease with an overt hybrid construction of public space as simultaneously religious and secular. These activists seamlessly incorporated Islamic invocations at the start of supposedly secular events and in doing so signaled a change in the normative boundaries between the religious and the secular.

**Second Generation Secularists**

Hatem Abudayyeh, executive director of the AAAN and son of Khairy Abudayyeh, exemplified the generational shift. In our many conversations between 2010 and 2015, Abudayyeh acknowledged the religious shift but denied it had made secularism irrelevant. First, the conditions of Palestinian life, in his view, remained inexorably secular. The central matter of Palestinian liberation, for example, was still unresolved. Moreover, the social and political challenges facing the immigrant community required nonreligious approaches and resources the mosques simply could not provide.

The programs and clientele of the AAAN underlined his point. Abudayyeh noted in a 2010 conversation that “90 percent of [the AAAN’s] social services clients come from the southwest suburbs; a large percentage [is] still under the poverty line in the suburbs, just like in Chicago
Lawn.” Still, the AAAN needed “to move to the suburbs; when it comes down to it, we have to.” But moving was hard to countenance. The organization’s urban identity and commitment to “progressive change” in alliance with other oppressed minority communities was “the core” of its identity. “We have worked hard at these alliances ever since my father’s time,” Abudayyeh remarked, “and it’s been really hard for some of us to understand that moving to the suburbs, where our base is located, is the correct path.”

But if the AAAN did move, it would recover its relevance, Abudayyeh asserted. The premises would be “jam-packed, alive from 8:00 a.m. till 10:00 p.m. like the markaz [the former ACC] used to be in the ’70s and ’80s.” People wanted alternatives to the mosques for their youth. “We offer a safe social and political space for young men and young women to come together in programming [to discuss] and challenge[s] systems of oppression,” Abudayyeh said. “We discuss Palestine and the Arab world but also the taboo issues: violence in the home, double standards, and patriarchy. I don’t think anybody’s talking about sexism and patriarchy in the Islamic institutions.” Not everyone was drawn to “this faith-based political Islamic trajectory.”

Where else were they going to go if there were no secular alternatives in the suburbs? Still, for many young AAAN program participants and staff, Islam was a manifest identity orientation. These individuals wore headscarves or beards and prayed on the AAAN’s premises. During Ramadan, as I noticed on one occasion, their computers were set to the times that sounded the adhan—the call to prayer—for the breaking of the fast. Whatever else it might have meant, seeing oneself as Palestinian now intertwined with the embrace of an Islamic piety that typified the religiously transformed ethos of the suburban enclave.

Abudayyeh implicitly acknowledged this fact. He accommodated the piety of the younger activists in the AAAN workspace, whereas twenty-five years earlier, markaz leaders had resisted public expressions of religiosity. He also partnered with the mosques and with groups like AMP to solicit support for AAAN programs and protest actions: he simply could not ignore the Islamic religious leadership, which could mobilize thousands of community members, as coalition partners. At the same time, Abudayyeh insisted, correctly, on the inescapability of the secular. The Islamic turn had not canceled or overcome the fundamental struggle for Palestinian liberation and community empowerment. In Abudayyeh’s view, secularism’s continuing relevance and the possibility of its renewal remained latent within this ineluctable reality. However, its relevance persisted in other ways, too—including and especially in its shaping effects on the religious turn itself.

**The Transformation of the Secular within the Religious Shift**

The current religious turn has formed politically, in part, as a response to a perceived failure of the PLO-led national movement. Religious responses to the collective political predicament predate this shift, as mentioned earlier and as discussed further below. The current revivification, as well, is not simply a response to the sense that secular nationalism, in the form of the PLO, has faltered. It also draws on processes of long-term religious institutionalization and habitus formation both in Palestine and in the diaspora. With that said, the contemporary shift, in political terms, addresses itself to the same predicament of dispossession and oppression as does secular nationalism, but it does so through religious, principally Islamic but also Christian, idioms and symbols. Significantly, the shift, Islamic or Christian, is not merely secularism in a different form. On the contrary, the shift constitutes a distinct and deliberate standpoint...
grounded deeply in narratives and practices that relate the Palestinian situation to divine imperatives and promises. At the center of that standpoint is a salvific narrative in which God confers restitution on those who hold fast in faith and suffering (the believers) and chastisement on those who refuse the divine commandments and oppress the innocent (the unbelievers).

In the Palestinian context, holding fast to faith entails, from the religious, salvific standpoint, the self-sacrificial, divinely mandated, and divinely justified struggle to redeem the “Holy Land,” which God, in the Islamic perspective, has granted to those who bear witness to his exclusivity and to Muhammad’s status as God’s envoy. This ideological formulation appears within the stated outlooks of the MB and its Palestinian offshoots, particularly Hamas. A Christian variation of this perspective—as articulated, for example, in the writings of Palestinian liberation theologians—draws on prophetic discourse in the Bible to cast the national struggle as enactment of the divine commandment to free the oppressed and establish “justice and only justice.”

Understanding how standpoints like these have textured Palestinian political identities, especially during and after the 1990s, requires close attention to the religious discourses, practices, and institutions of Palestinian communities. The religious shift does not produce a misrecognized or “false” secularism. Nevertheless, the political conditions that this new orientation responds to and sacralizes within its terms are uncontestably secular in the sense that the immediate goal remains the same as the one that had oriented the PLO-led national movement: the establishment of a territorially bounded state, possibly an Islamic one, in which Palestinians attain their freedom and rights within the geographical limits comprising present-day Israel and the occupied West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza Strip. What emerges, then, is a religiously inflected secularism, a religious secularity, that resists strict secular-religious dichotomization.

**Sacralizing the Secular in Chicago: American Muslims for Palestine**

In Chicago, the imparting of a new religious orientation to Palestinian political solidarities took institutional form with the creation in the mid-2000s of AMP. This organization, which now has a national presence, including an office in Washington has transformed nationalist Palestinian solidarity within the mythos and practices of Islam. A close analysis of its 2013 annual conference, which took place at the Crowne Plaza hotel near Chicago’s O’Hare International Airport, illustrates how this occurs.

The theme of the 2013 conference was “A Blessed Land a Noble Cause.” The conference publicity included, in Arabic, the Qur’anic gloss “al-ladhi barakna hawlahu.” This phrase, which translates as “whose surroundings we have blessed,” comes from the Qur’anic passages traditionally considered as describing Muhammad’s *isra’ wa al-mi’raj*, the nocturnal flight from Mecca to Jerusalem and subsequent heavenly ascension from the Haram platform (Qur’an 17:1). The surroundings that God blesses in the Qur’an refer to an area extending around al-Aqsa Mosque. Islamic religious scholars have debated the spatial extent and the theo-political implications of the blessing. But the Qur’anic reference and the resulting status of Jerusalem as Islam’s third-holiest site, after Mecca and Medina in present-day Saudi Arabia, have become central to Islamist discourse in the oPt and abroad. The image on the conference logo and poster, which also appeared on conference badges, showed the Old City in the middle
distance with the Qubbat al-Sakhra, the Dome of the Rock, rising above it in the center. At the top of the poster was the AMP logo and a heading that read: “The Conference for Palestine in the US: A Blessed Land a Noble Cause [sic].” Beneath this banner was the Qur’anic verse referring to how God had blessed the area around al-Aqsa. These words were superimposed over a map of the Middle East. The map floated faintly in the background sky above barbed wire and the dome. Iraq and Syria, labeled in English, appeared centrally. Palestine, too, appeared, in bold capitalization. Israel registered in its utter absence of mention even though the boundaries marking the West Bank and Gaza Strip in relation to the area in which Israel proclaimed its sovereignty following the 1948 war were nevertheless visible on the map.

This same imagery provided the backdrop for the stage in the main plenary hall. Here, the golden dome predominated, de-emphasizing non-Muslim (Christian and Jewish) sacred landmarks. The only reference to Jewish presence in the conference imagery occurred implicitly, for example, in the foregrounded loops of barbed wire that framed the Dome of the Rock. These unmistakably evoked Israel’s domination of the city and its use of walls and fences to exclude Palestinians, specifically Muslim Palestinians. The barbed wire barrier marred the image of the Old City and the Dome of the Rock, although olive trees still appeared within the compound. The greenery suggested that the signs of the divine blessing (the baraka said to pervade and surround the Holy City)—which, according to tafsir literature (scholarly Muslim commentary on the Qur’an), consist of the flourishing of flora and fauna—persisted even as Islam’s enemies had disfigured the land.

The gesture toward Iraq and Syria in the map background of the poster and badge image hinted at the reasons for emphasizing Jerusalem and the divinely blessed land surrounding it as the conference theme. In the bulletin’s welcome note, the organizers made these reasons explicit, stating, “With the tragedies occurring in Syria and unrest in Lebanon and Israel’s continual grinding military occupation of Palestine, it is important to remind ourselves that this is the Holy Land, . . . which Allah swt [subhanahu wa ta’ala, in English: glorious is he and most high] has blessed.” The references to the turmoil in the region and its links to Palestine evoked the Arab Spring uprisings and the changes they promised. The conference program note explicitly underscored the allusion, asking, “How do we move forward? How do we relate our work for Palestine to the struggles for freedom and democracy throughout the Middle East?”

Locally, in Chicago, the Arab uprisings generated a number of fissures. Just two months before AMP’s 2013 conference, the head imam of the Mosque Foundation publicly called upon the Obama administration to use military force against Syrian regime targets in response to a chemical weapons attack in the Damascus suburbs. The demand reflected the sympathy of the Mosque Foundation’s leadership for the victims of Syria’s civil war and for Syrian opposition movements, such as the MB, which the regime of Bashar al-Assad had brutally targeted. This endorsement of U.S. military action did not receive universal support, however. The head of another, smaller, predominantly Palestinian mosque issued an opposing statement that declared any such intervention an attack on Muslims and Islam. Calling for an attack against Syria was tantamount, he said, to the sin of fitna (destroying Muslim unity through violence against fellow Muslims). The target of these remarks—the Mosque Foundation—was unmistakable.

The AMP conference in November 2013 endeavored to transcend such tensions and return the focus to Palestine. It did so by calling on its audience to remember, in the midst of horrendous violence, that Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan, as well as Iraq and Egypt—as
indicated in the conference publicity’s map image—constituted, in the organization’s view, the very lands that God, in the Qur’an, had blessed and made holy to Muslims. The inclusion of these other countries within the category of the holy served the unifying purpose of the conference. By recalling this “Holy Land,” and by seeing their respective countries included within it, Arab Muslims, in particular, were to see themselves as sharing a common identity and predicament in the United States and in the Middle East. The semiotics of the conference reinforced this sentiment by redirecting attention to Israel as the foremost threat. The barbed wire that cut off the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa symbolized the repression of all Muslims in the region. The implication was hard to miss: to free Jerusalem, to return it to Muslim suzerainty, was, in AMP’s perspective, to free Muslims throughout the Middle East.

The compelling force of this logic derived from a long history in which Jerusalem and the “Holy Land” had served as symbolic proxies for Arab and Muslim anti-colonial struggles.

During the 1920s and 1930s, for example, Grand Mufti of Jerusalem al-Haj Amin al-Husseini (ca. 1895–1974) made Jerusalem central to an appeal for global Islamic support for the Palestinian cause. Islamic solidarity focusing on Palestine also inspired Izzedin al-Qassam (ca. 1881–1935), a Syrian Pan-Islamic preacher who helped organize armed cells to resist the Zionists and the British government under the Mandate and whose mass appeal, both during his period of organizing (when he pioneered the mobilizing of ordinary people, workers, and uprooted peasants in the shantytowns of urban centers like Haifa) and after his death in a British police ambush, proved significant for expanding and sustaining the 1936–39 rebellion. Hassan al-Banna (1906–49), who founded the MB in 1928, also made Palestine a core theme in his public preaching. Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) have appealed directly to the memory of both al-Qassam and al-Banna.

The claim here is not that any sort of direct organizational or material link exists between AMP and Hamas or PIJ but rather that AMP draws on tropes common to Palestinian Islamism generally. In doing so, AMP does not simply reproduce these discursive figures but adapts them to the diaspora. In contrast to the Islamist movements in Palestine, for example, AMP does not directly invoke jihad and does not explicitly refute the legitimacy of Israel through open references to Palestine as an Islamic patrimony or waqf (an Islamic religious endowment). Rather, it hews to the international consensus that deems Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip illegal. It adopts the language of international covenants and rights, a discourse that transcends particularistic national and religious claims. It also refrains from advocating any specific end-of-conflict scenario, whether one state or two, and remains silent on whether or not the objective should be the creation of a shari’a-based state, the explicit long-term goal of groups like the MB and Hamas.

Still, AMP’s invocation of Qur’anic rhetoric and symbols resonates with Islamic conceptions of jihad and the “Holy Land.” This complex discursive framing, explicit and implicit, elides non-Muslim territorial claims primarily through an implied reference to Palestine as a waqf. The endowment concept, elaborated within Islamic fiqh (jurisprudence), renders the “Holy Land” an inalienable Islamic trust bequeathed to Muslims in perpetuity. As recipients of this God-given trust, Muslims, especially those for whom Palestine is their national home, incur the responsibility for care and defense of the land. The 2013 conference implied these themes—it did not state them explicitly—by linking advocacy for Palestine as a “noble cause” to the idea of Palestine and the Sham (Levant) as a “blessed land.” This phrase, “noble cause,” implies the Qur’anic conception of jihad as a struggle undertaken fi sabil illah (in the cause [literally, path] of God). Such struggle encompasses a wide range of actions: verbal denunciation of
oppression, steadfast persistence under conditions of suffering, nonviolent protest and advocacy, armed resistance, internal spiritual effort to overcome the ego so as to achieve unity with divine reality and purpose, and giving of time and money to causes of charity and justice (the spending of one’s wealth in the cause of God).\textsuperscript{41} AMP’s discourse situates its advocacy within this spectrum of activities. In AMP’s framing, the duty to struggle for the “Holy Land” through nonviolent public advocacy and protest actions expands to become incumbent upon all Muslims in the United States as central to their submission to God.

**Calling the Murabitun**

The primary purpose of AMP’s annual conference is to educate Muslims about their duties toward Palestine, stir a passionate reaction that can lead to mobilization, and channel action toward participation in AMP’s organizational structures. The conference performs this work in several ways, including by instructing youth about the issue of Palestine and about their distinctive responsibilities as Muslims toward it. Born in the United States, youth are at risk of losing touch with the Palestinian cause and of assimilating into U.S. society and culture. They also have to contend with anti-Muslim and anti-Arab racism, a persisting reality that has intensified since the launching of the putative “War on Terror.”\textsuperscript{42} Impressing on them their Islamic duties to the homeland is seen as a possible counter to the assimilation danger and as reinforcing a sense of religious and national self-worth. Young people also represent, if properly oriented, potential future activists and supporters of AMP’s mission.\textsuperscript{43}

The 2013 conference’s special sessions for youth included a lecture by a young shaykh on the importance of Palestine in Islam. In his talk, the shaykh emphasized the special status of Palestinian Muslims as the *murabitun*, those believing men, primarily (the term has a collective connotation but is in the masculine plural form), who are “tied” to or “garrisoned” within the land and tasked with defending it (the term comes from the Arabic root word r-b-t, to tie).\textsuperscript{44} He did so while also reminding the gathered youth that Palestine belonged to all Muslims, not just to Palestinians. He conveyed both messages by recounting the centrality of Palestine as the site of the second-holiest mosque and as the land of a succession of prophets culminating with Muhammad. Being tied, the shaykh said, engendered a deep connection to the Prophet Muhammad. The link was not just to land, lineage, and cultural background but to the actual Islamic heritage that ties all Muslims, and especially Palestinians, to the Prophet. The shaykh stressed the particularity of the Palestinian Islamic bond to the “Holy Land” by referring to the establishment of Muslim rule in Jerusalem under ‘Umar Ibn al-Khattab in 637 CE and the restoration of Islamic control following Salah al-Din Ibn Ayyub’s successful retaking of the city from the Franks in 1187.\textsuperscript{45}

Beyond its affirmation of the unique Palestinian Muslim status, the shaykh’s message, wittingly or not, carried a subtle, implicit critique of those Palestinians, especially in the diaspora, who neglected the duty of being tied. *Murabitun* status entailed physical presence—as posted, forward defenders—in the land. Implicitly, however, those who had immigrated to Chicago had relinquished this duty. They could ameliorate this condition, however, if they dedicated themselves to advocacy, for example, through AMP.

As its 2013 gathering illustrates, AMP’s annual conferences create a narrative, symbolic, and performative context for the articulation of Palestinian diaspora identity through an Islamic nationalist idiom. This idiom centralizes Palestine as the core Islamic commitment.
As one long-time Islamic activist, a former board member of the Mosque Foundation and founder of Islamic Palestinian advocacy groups that preceded AMP, put it:

Palestine is a cause; but it's more than just about the nation. It's the most important cause of Islam. Palestine is part of the Qur'an. God took the Prophet from Mecca to Jerusalem, and he prayed with all the prophets in Jerusalem at Aqsa [al-Aqsa Mosque]. He made Palestine of the same level as Mecca and Medina. It does not matter what your nationality is. If you become a Muslim tomorrow, Palestine becomes your 'aqida [creed], your duty.46

This identification of Islam's core doctrine—at the center of which is the affirmation of God's oneness—with the Palestinian national cause effectively secularizes Islam, even as it Islamizes the nation. In doing so, it elides the underlying tensions between religious universality and nationalist particularity. At various points, this appeal to Islamic solidarity can strain against the moral imperatives of nationalist commitments, as the tensions surrounding the Arab Spring uprisings demonstrated. The privileging of the Palestinian issue as the heart of Islamic commitment, moreover, can provoke resentments from non-Palestinian Muslims as well as from non-Muslim Palestinians, who view the emphasis on one or the other term—Palestinian or Islamic—as excluding others who claim one or the other identity as their own. These tensions point to complexities that exceed attempts to make particular types of solidarity dominant, for example, “Muslim” or “Palestinian.” They also index the limits and instability of specifically religious frameworks for national political mobilization. A close look at individual life trajectories shows, moreover, that the religious shift can generate new forms of identity that partially disenchant the individual and also desacralize the new, religiously framed solidarity. Thus, the religious shift not only secularizes the umma (nation) by centering Palestinian national liberation as the core Islamic commitment; it can also ironically give rise to novel types of secularism at the individual level.

“Secular Islam” on the Margins of “Arabville”

The individualized forms of secularism I document encompass a range of possible trajectories. One kind of trajectory is what I term “secular religiosity,” a type of syncretic secularity enacted in an abandonment of reformist piety and of sectarian identity.47 This syncretic form retains religious belief in modified ways as part of an alternative, “polytheistic,” or pluralized sense of self. In form and content, it approximates a type of multicultural individualism that seeks recognition of ethnic and religious difference from the state and also within society as part of a discourse of acceptance and equality as opposed to an insistence on assimilation. This desire for individual recognition resists the demand for ideological conformity, religious or secular, and instead emphasizes, in political terms, the goal of a single, democratic state in Palestine of all its citizens regardless of ethnic, national, or religious identity.

One example of “secular religiosity” in my fieldwork was Muna (pseudonym), a twenty-five-year-old graduate student at a prominent university in Chicago when I first met her in 2010. Muna's trajectory had gone from an initial, traumatizing immersion within the reformist milieu to an embrace of “secular Islam” (her term). Her path reveals the disenchanting impact of the religious shift and the reorienting effect of the pluralized, secular society beyond the immigrant enclave.
Muna’s schooling until age fourteen had occurred entirely within the Islamic confessional structures of the Islamized immigrant milieu, which she termed “Arabville.” These structures, which were geared toward reinforcing religio-communal norms and insulating individuals, especially girls and women, against the majority non-Muslim U.S. society had in Muna’s case produced the exact opposite of the intended result. By age fourteen or fifteen, Muna had begun to question the strictures of the Islamic schools she attended. She made a definitive break when her parents, no longer able to afford private school tuition, placed her and her sister in the public system. Freed of the disciplining norms of the Islamic schools, she cast aside her hijab. This act, as well as deciding to no longer fast during Ramadan, signaled her embrace of an alternative value structure made possible by her movement beyond the enclave’s disciplinary space.

Muna’s desacralizing shift deepened after her parents divorced. Following the dissolution of the marriage, Muna moved with her mother and sister to Texas. In this transition, her break from the patriarchal-reformist norms became permanent. She described getting involved in the local youth party scene in Texas and experiencing its taboo-breaking effects: “When I left the community and saw other ways of life, the whole ingraining started to leave me. I mean, when I moved to Texas, I took my first sip of alcohol. I thought, ah, so this is sinning!”

Muna subsequently returned to live in Chicago, seeking to reconnect with her father and the Palestinian community. Her sense of alienation from the suburban milieu nevertheless persisted. She stated: “Sometimes, I don’t consider myself Muslim at all.” She continued to refuse the scarf, saying she did not consider it even necessary for the prayers (salat). The prayer itself had actually ceased to be important to her, and it did not matter to her that one pray as a Muslim. She even expressed a desire not to have a Muslim burial: “I don’t wanna be buried in a Muslim cemetery because I feel like my whole life I’ve struggled against that, and to be right next to everybody I’ve tried to distinguish myself from?”

At the same time, however, she claimed not to have rejected Islam fully. She said she continued to think of herself as a “cultural Muslim” who shared patterns of speech and a common cuisine. Muna also viewed Islam as a strategic resource, invoking it and the statements of a Mosque Foundation shaykh at one point to resist the demands of her parents-in-law that her husband financially support them. Thus, even if she did not adhere to Islamic strictures in her daily life, she deployed Islamic norms to defend and expand her autonomy. She also wondered whether Islamic prohibitions on alcohol might be good for her. “I have given up alcohol and am cutting back on pot, and I wish my husband would do the same,” she told me.

In 2013, Muna traveled for the first time to Palestine to search for family and learn about the political situation there. In Haifa and Ramallah, she discovered party scenes that rivaled anything she had encountered in the United States. She also crossed paths with two men she recognized as being from the Chicago suburban enclave. They were married and, as she recounted, they presented themselves as upstanding and pious members of the Mosque Foundation. But in Palestine, she alleged, they engaged in extramarital liaisons. “The hypocrisy,” she remarked, “made me feel even more alienated from ‘Arabville’ back home.”

Muna’s ambivalence toward Islam and its social forms as enacted in the suburban enclave led her to oscillate between adaptation and refusal of religious identity. She explained: “I still consider myself a spiritual person, I still believe in God.” She was not an atheist, which she said was “different from secularism.” She resisted orthopraxical Islam—that is, the approach to piety she encountered in the suburbs that emphasized adherence to the stipulated prayers
and to sartorial regimens like wearing the hijab—while retaining an inner sense of “spirituality” that allowed her to preserve a relationship to the immigrant community on her own terms. She had begun “meeting other Palestinians and Muslims and Arabs” and through that experience “learning the different ranges of being Muslim.” Muna had also found alternative spaces—she was part of a feminist reading group at her university, for example—in which women collaborated to challenge the patriarchal norms that mandated female subordination. Crossing between these zones and the immigrant enclave, she found a way to remain connected to “Arabville” as a skeptical, “secular Muslim.” Significantly, this secularity registered in a sense of isolation. She had not encountered the AAAN, for example, which had remained in the old immigrant enclave on the Southwest Side of the city and did not, at the time, have a presence in the suburbs. Muna's secularity was deinstitutionalized and hybrid, as a consequence, retaining a connection to Islam but within highly individualized parameters. She was a “secular Muslim” on the fringes of the Islamized suburban enclave.

“Love, God, and Palestine”

A second example, this time featuring a Christian Palestinian, exemplifies a similar process of initial immersion in a piety-minded milieu followed by a rejection of it. In this case, however, the rejection does not produce an explicit secular alternative—as in “secular Islam”—but rather the formation of an idiosyncratic, spiritualized nationalism that rejects and transcends sectarian solidarities. The example below comes from an interview with Sawsan (pseudonym), an artist and activist who described her confrontation with the mechanisms of patriarchal control within the religious-sectarian milieu in which she grew up. This clash led her to reject Christianity and launch a subsequent search for an alternative moral community and identity. The process began in Palestine, where Islam and nationalism, both of which intertwined during the Second Intifada (2000–2005), provided other possibilities. The embrace of these options led to a series of transformations that ended in the assertion of an individualized spirituality and in an affirmation of pluralism on the margins of the Islamized/Christianized milieu in the Chicago diaspora.

Sawsan grew up in a Roman Catholic (“Latin,” in the mashriq context) family in the West Bank town of Bayt Jala. She immigrated with her family to Chicago in 2002, when she was a university student. Her father, whose bakery business had collapsed during the Second Intifada, wanted to take advantage of his brother's invitation to help launch a restaurant in the city. Economic reasons were not the only motives for the move. The family also worried about the political and religious paths Sawsan had begun to travel during her teenage years. Sawsan had become alienated from her local Catholic parish church and its religiosity. The priest at the church had shamed her “for being chubby; that was one of my earliest memories of being bullied, and it was by a priest; I hated being around that community.” The nuns, she said, were also cruel to her.

Sawsan's growing revulsion toward Catholicism occurred just as the al-Aqsa Intifada (the Second Intifada) was beginning in the late summer of 2000. The peace process—to which the PLO and Fatah, especially, had linked their fate—collapsed. Carrying out a series of bombings in response to Israel's violence, Hamas claimed the mantle of defender of the nation and in so doing linked Islam to national liberation for a new generation of activists. Sawsan's narrative reflected the impact of this development. She began watching Muslim preachers on television during this
time; listening to Qur’anic recitation on the radio at night, which, she said, “would help [her] sleep, make [her] feel better”; and defending Islam to her family. Increasingly, she viewed Islam as the authentic core of Palestinian identity: “There was a relationship between being Palestinian and being Muslim, like in Islam, it is a duty to defend your land, it just made sense.”

Sawsan’s father soon shuttered his business and took the family to Chicago. The move traumatized his daughter. Sawsan withdrew emotionally, sequestering herself in her room. “It was a very messy, dark time,” she remembered. And yet, in the midst of this difficult passage, rather than break from her past she immersed herself in it: “My connection to Islam continued, it intensified, and I finally converted in 2010,” eight years after leaving Palestine. The trajectory of Sawsan’s conversion diverged, however, from the reformist Islam that had taken root in the Palestinian community. Bosnian friends whom she met while working as a waitress invited her to a discussion that a white professor convened every Sunday in his North Side apartment. She began attending regularly. “It was amazing!” she commented. “I had never heard anything like it from any Arabic Muslim speaker; just so much spirituality, and I fell in love with it and felt ready.” The professor took the group on a trip to visit a Shi’i mosque in Dearborn, Michigan. “That’s where I declared myself a Muslim,” Sawsan said.

Sawsan’s idiosyncratic path—among the Sunni-majority Palestinians, Shiism was heterodoxy—reflected the depth of her alienation from both the Christian and Muslim segments of the Palestinian community. Her rejection of the Christian milieu stemmed from her refusal to abide the community’s anti-Muslim, anti-nationalist sentiment. The Christians she interacted with wanted, in her view, “to get rid of their Arabness and assimilate to white.”48 The priest at her mother’s church also often spoke about “how our worst enemy was atheism and Islam and that we moved here [to the United States] as religious refugees, we were persecuted by Muslims.” Such comments enraged her: “I mean, are you kidding me! He never once mention[ed] the Israeli occupation. I just would get sick and would go home crying afterwards.”

The Islamized suburban enclave also repulsed her. “I just did not like [the Mosque Foundation], how the shaykh was saying, oh, if you pray this way, it’s haram [forbidden]. I was, like, oh, for God’s sake, the crowd is being talked to like cattle!” The shaykh’s refusal to speak with the women who came to worship also “insult[ed] my intelligence.” She recalled sensing from the imam “this feeling of shame that I am a woman, like I should look down and away from men, be ashamed; and men, if they see a woman, they [should] run away.” At the Dearborn mosque, by contrast, “There wasn’t such a harsh division between male and female.” Her conversion in Michigan failed to sustain itself, however. She stopped attending prayers in the mosques and became cautious about telling other Arabs she was a Muslim, since “they wouldn’t believe [her].” They would point out that she didn’t pray regularly and that she had tattoos. Given the prejudice and judgment, she concluded, “I guess I can’t even be a Muslim.” Still, whenever she listened to the Qur’an, she felt “at home, connected to Palestine.”

I asked her about her tattoos. “I have this one,” she said, as she angled her wrist toward me. “It’s the first one I designed when I came here. It says, ‘There are three things in my soul: Love, God, and Palestine.’” This triune declaration—a striking nationalist reconfiguration of the Christian conception of the divine—appeared in elaborate Arabic calligraphy. She pointed to another etching on her other wrist, also in Arabic. “This one is ruh,” she said, “it means ‘spirit.’” Again, the reference to the third Person of the Christian notion of God was unmistakable. The concept was central in Islam, too: the ruh suffused laylat al-qadr (the night of destiny) during which Muhammad first recited the divine revelation. She mentioned two other tattoos
on her back, one of which was an image of an iconic, leftist female resistance figure from the 1970s. “It’s a memory of the old times of the Palestinian revolution,” she remarked, although Sawsan no longer seemed to believe in the revolution.

In Chicago, she had developed friendships with Jewish activists who opposed Israel’s policies and advocated for Palestinian freedom. She also listened to the music of Jewish Israeli artists of Arab cultural background (Mizrahi Jews). These connections, emergent for her within her exilic conditions, led her to embrace a type of multicultural refiguring of the one-state ideal that had been central to the PLO’s political vision prior to its shift toward acceptance of partition and statehood in the areas occupied by Israel in 1967. She referred to this idea explicitly, asserting that she was “one of the few Palestinians who believe[d] in a one-state solution.” She explained her commitment to this idea, however, not in ideological terms but rather in relational, cultural, and spiritual ones. It was in these emphases that her conception of “one-state” approximated a multicultural individualism. She reflected further along these lines, stating:

I do open my heart. I can see a human being in front of me and not a label or a flag. Part of my soul is just so tired of all this nationalism and blood. Maybe this is one blessing this country [the United States] gave to me. [It] is a blessing that I am not judged [here] for having the sides of my head shaved and that I can look at a human being and judge them by their character and not by what they are wearing, whether they are wearing hijab or covered in tattoos. Not everyone thinks the way I do, but this country, this city, gives me the room to do so, [the room] to be an individual.49

In their differing articulations of secularity, Sawsan and Muna affirmed a type of individualistic multiculturalism; but this affirmation must be seen within the context of the patriarchal order—both religious and cultural—which they resisted, as well as the critique of Zionism and the Palestinian national struggle, which they embraced in isolation from formal movement structures. Muna never expressed support for any particular political outcome in Palestine, whether one or two states, for example; but she had traveled to the West Bank and had increasingly embraced a Palestinian identity. Her primary locus for this identity remained the Chicago enclave, however, not a particular political orientation. She sought to retain connection to the enclave for this reason, even as she asserted her independence from the reformist piety that had taken root within it.

Sawsan, by contrast, declared her support for the one-state ideal, hearkening to her original leftist factional loyalties in Palestine before her migration to Chicago. During our conversation, however, she reinterpreted this ideal through a multicultural lens that she connected to her experience in the United States. In Chicago, away from the enclave, she had found acceptance of her individuality. She was not judged for her tattoos and shaved head. Her multicultural revision of the one-state remained attentive to power, however. She, like Muna, rejected patriarchal authority and Zionist settler colonialism; at the same time, she refused a nationalism that submerged individuals, in all of their particularities, within a demand to conform to a specific collective ideal, be it secular or religious. Her vision was utopian: in the one-state beyond Zionist settler colonialism and “all this nationalism and blood” lay the possibility of the peaceful coexistence of diverse individuals and communities. In the meantime, she would speak out and support the national struggle, albeit in her own individual ways that bore the stamp of her diasporic experience and prefigured the world she yearned for in Palestine itself.

* * *
The religious shift has powerfully shaped Palestinian political identities since the late 1980s. It has deeply split the Palestinian political field as secular organizational structures have weakened. This process has taken different directions in Palestine and in Palestinian diaspora communities. In both contexts, however, a range of hybrid orientations has emerged, signaling secularism’s deinstitutionalization but not necessarily its decline in relevance. The dissolution of secular structures and the concomitant emergence of new religious ones has transmuted secular concerns—specifically, the Palestinian national cause—within the terms of Islamic and Christian discourses that speak of struggle as a duty to God, justice as the primary virtue, and Palestine as a divine bequest rightfully belonging to the faithful. AMP exemplifies this transmutation. It transforms the meaning of the national cause within the terms, memories, and concepts it draws from the Qur’an and from Islamic history.

Viable alternatives that provide space for those who have become alienated within the sacralized, piety-minded milieus no longer exist in the same way they once did. The effects of this absence register in the highly idiosyncratic and individualized reactions against religious structures. Muna and Sawsan rejected the religious milieu, for example, but had not become connected to other spaces such as the AAAN, which was not present in an appreciable way in the suburbs at the time. Both individuals remained concerned about the Palestinian predicament and were active on the issue in various ways; but their accounts did not give evidence of any sort of integration into alternative, nonsectarian or multisectarian structures.

The religious shift has not been monolithic. Sawsan and Muna’s stories demonstrate this point. Whether the disenchantment they express indicates a broader desacralization, or even the emergence of a new, broader secularism that transcends the religiously framed politics of Palestine, however, remains to be seen. In the Chicago area, the Islamized frame for national politics persists and has become hegemonic (taken for granted), if sartorial styles (scarves, beards); adherence to prayer rituals; increased mosque attendance; and invocations of Islamic terms and symbols at demonstrations, rallies, and organizing meetings are any indication. Yet as Sawsan and Muna show, sacralization can produce disenchantment at the individual level. The religious shift is dominant, but its consequences include, incipiently and ironically, the possibility of the emergence of a new secular imaginary in which solidarity expands beyond religion and nation. As the very possibility of Palestine recedes—Israel’s de facto but still unrecognized annexation of the West Bank appears an accomplished fact—“secular Islam” and an inclusive spirituality, however deinstitutionalized and marginal, offer new conceptions of self and other beyond “nationalism and blood” and the orthopraxical demands of a pious hegemony.

About the Author

Endnotes

1. This article excerpts sections from the introduction and chapters 1, 2, 3, and 6 of my book, *Palestinian Chicago: Identity in Exile* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020). I am honored to have been invited by Louise Cainkar to contribute to this special issue. Louise pioneered sociological research on the Chicago Palestinian community, and I have relied on her work extensively. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers, as well as Emily Smith, Maia Tabet, Maggie Nye Smith, and the editorial board of the *Journal of Palestine Studies*—Sherene Seikaly, in particular—for their exceedingly helpful criticisms and edits of the draft.


8. Cainkar, “Islamic Revival,” p. 113. The impact of an increasing rate of immigration from the Middle East and other Muslim-majority regions following the 1965 reform of U.S. immigration law is relevant to this process of religious revivification. Cainkar notes the relevance of this factor in Chicago, especially with the arrival of a new professional class from Palestine but also from other countries like Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt. These new professionals provided leadership and ties to financial resources that were crucial to the creation of institutions like the Mosque Foundation. Cainkar argues further, however, that increasing immigration alone does not account for the religious shift, since much if not most of the transition to the new reformist piety occurred among established second- and third-generation immigrants. Cainkar’s observations coincide with my own memories of this period, during which I witnessed increased identification with Islam among young, U.S.-born activists in presumably secular spaces. For additional details on the religious shift in Chicago across different Muslim communities during the 1990s, see Garbi Schmidt, *Islam in Urban America: Sunni Muslims in Chicago* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2004).
9. This secularity lies in the fact that like all nationalisms, including Zionism, Palestinian nationalism conceives of collective identity primarily in terms of the ethnos and the territorially bounded homeland which it claims. Religions, especially monotheisms, imagine identities in terms that might include sacred territories and spaces, but the gods to whom believers owe their allegiance frequently come to be seen as transcending these bounds. This is certainly true of the God worshipped in Islam, Christianity, and even Judaism which, despite its close identification with the biblical people Israel, the “Land of Israel,” and the God YHWH, nevertheless develops a conception of a universal divinity and worshipping community existing well beyond any specific territorial limit: the “Land of Israel” increasingly becomes a symbol of a hoped-for messianic restoration in an unspecified and unknown future, but it is neither the necessary abode of God, who no longer is perceived as constrained by territory, nor the necessary site of worship as, through the rabbis, worshipful study and prayer in the synagogue replace sacrifice in the temple as the preeminent acts of devotion. Nationalisms reverse this sort of religious transcendence of territory by secularizing religious conceptions of sacred space and worshipping community. This transformation is accomplished by rendering the ethnos, sometimes seen as existing since time immemorial, and its delimited place the supreme objects of loyalty and identity. Nationalisms can certainly include religion as a basis and justification for the imagined link between the ethnos and its bounded place. Zionism does precisely this by rejecting the diaspora as the site of faithful obedience to God and refocusing on the “Land of Israel” as the sole space of authentic Jewish existence: the biblical claim to the land is appropriated as a basis for the national claim. Significantly, it is the ethnos and its delimited territory that become the primary reference in this maneuver. God and community are effectively contained within this reference rather than the other way around. Benedict Anderson’s seminal *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (New York: Verso, 2006) remains the definitive statement on these issues. For a critical application of the Andersonian thesis to the origins of Palestinian nationalism, see Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. xi–xiii and 28–34. Khalidi notes how Palestinian national consciousness at different levels (elite and non-elite) drew on older Islamic, Christian, and Jewish notions of holy land. I would add only that in appropriating these earlier conceptions and linking them to a modern conception of nation and territory, Palestinian nationalism secularized religious imaginings. It did not erase the religious conceptions but rather reconceived and revalued them in terms of the primary loyalty to the ethnos—imagined in intersectarian terms in contrast with Zionism’s exclusion of non-Jews—and the defense of the territory it claimed for itself. The religious conception has remained latent in this type of transformation, it bears noting, and available to a reverse appropriation by religious movements that reassert the primacy of loyalty to God, however conceived in the given tradition of the movement. Thus, religious Zionists revalue secular Zionist imaginaries by linking the state-building project to a very particular interpretation of divine messianic aims: the formation of the state and the colonization of the land constitute the necessary enactment of divine commandments and the hoped-for redemption in the here and now. As such, religious Zionists remake Judaism into a territorially focused religion at odds with the transcendent Judaism of the diaspora but in parallel with secular Zionism, albeit in a transformed, sacralized mode. On this point, see Tamara Neuman, *Settling Hebron: Jewish Fundamentalism in a Palestinian City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), pp. 1–25 and elsewhere. In another example, Hamas has spoken of Palestine as a holy land and a waqf given in perpetuity by God to the Muslims, among whom the Palestinians play a special role as forward defenders of this divine trust. Non-Muslim Palestinians (Christians, for example) revert to “protected tribute-paying peoples” (*ahl al-dhimma*) in this conception. On this last point, see Lybarger, “For Church or Nation?” pp. 791–92. See also Andrea Nüsse, *Muslim Palestine: The Ideology of Hamas* (1998; repr., London: Routledge Curzon, 2002).


12. For more detail on the Palestinian Christian community in Chicago, see Lybarger, *Palestinian Chicago*, pp. 29–57.


14. Drawn from empirical data, ideal types deliberately accentuate certain features of “patterned meaningful action” that in lived reality is fluid and complex. The ideal type as such does not exist, empirically. Rather, it is a provisional abstraction that enables the demarcation, comparison, and interpretation of phenomena one wishes to understand. To be clear, an ideal type, because it is historically based, is not any sort of transhistorical, metaphysical essence. Rather, it is a heuristic device that through application inevitably undergoes revision and reconfiguration and even abandonment if it no longer appears useful. Thus, for example, instead of a single, undifferentiated image of secularism, the result of application will likely be, as is the case in this paper, an empirically rich concept reflecting different developmental possibilities, including hybrid ones influenced by the interaction with religion. See Stephen Kalberg, *Max Weber’s Comparative-Historical Sociology Today: Major Themes, Mode of Causal Analysis, and Applications* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 99–101.

15. Makdisi focuses primarily on how such coexistence (*al-‘aysh al-mushtarak*) was imagined among actors situated in the *mashriq* (inclusive of present-day Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine/Israel, and Egypt). He posits the “ecumenical frame” as a distinct alternative to the racist colonial order. The ecumenical frame constitutes an attempt to manage or overcome incipient sectarianism that at times has broken out in violence (as for example in the bloodletting between Druze and Christians in Mount Lebanon in 1860 and the rampages that same year through the Christian quarter of Bab Tuma in Damascus “following the arrest of Muslim boys who had been drawing crosses on the streets of the city”). Makdisi sees this response as indigenous to the *mashriq* with unique sources in the so-called *millet* system of the Ottoman period. Sectarianism, he notes further, functions divisively in the *mashriq* much like race and racism does in the West. Makdisi is perhaps too categorical: race is hardly irrelevant to the structures of inequality in the Middle East, as Sherene Seikaly has pointed out; and religious sectarianism is no stranger to political and social conflict in the West, as the role, for example, of Christian activists in the mob violence at the U.S. Capitol building on 6 January 2021 illustrates clearly. See Ussama Makdisi, *Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), pp. 54–55 and elsewhere (above quote at p. 54); and Sherene Seikaly, “The Matter of Time,” *American Historical Review* 124, no. 5 (December 2019): pp. 1681–88, [https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/rhz1138](https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/rhz1138). Despite the ecumenical orientation, intersec- tarian tension could and did develop, especially as European powers encroached on Ottoman sovereignty; ethnic-religious nationalisms sparked brutal acts of ethnic cleansing in different parts of the Ottoman Empire; and Zionist activism succeeded in establishing an exclusive Jewish presence in Palestine, especially following the creation of the British Mandate for Palestine. The literature on these issues is extensive. A particularly balanced treatment is the recently published book by Heather J. Sharkey, *A History of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). See also Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years’ War on Palestine: A History of Settler-Colonial Conquest and Resistance, 1917–2017* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2020).


23. David Martin, *Religion and Power: No Logos without Mythos* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014); and Martin Riesebrodt, “Secularism: Ideals, Ideologies, and Institutional Practices; Opening Remarks” (lecture, international conference organized under the auspices of the Yves Oltramare Chair on Religion and Politics in the Contemporary World, The Graduate Institute, Geneva, Switzerland, 25–27 September 2014). Talal Asad makes a similar point in stating that the “sacred and secular depend on each other” and that this can be seen, for example, in how “religious myth contributed to the formation of modern historical knowledge and modern poetic sensibility.” See Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, p. 26.


25. Musa (pseudonym), interview with the author, Chicago, IL, 21 July 2011.


27. This center was known in the community to have this ideological sympathy. I have no evidence of formal organizational ties, and I did not seek this evidence.


30. Musa (pseudonym), interview with the author.

31. Khairy Abudayyeh, interview with the author, Chicago, IL, 10 August 2010. The organization has since established a satellite office in the suburbs—this occurred in 2015—while maintaining its main headquarters on the Southwest Side of the city.

32. Abudayyeh, interview, 10 August 2010.


35. This image is viewable at 0:41 and at 1:22 in the video that the conference organizers produced as part of the publicity package. The video concludes with an image of the al-Aqsa Mosque, which is situated on the Haram platform. See “The Conference for Palestine in the US: A Blessed Land; A Noble Cause,” Vimeo video, 1:47, posted by American Muslims for Palestine, 28 August 2013, https://vimeo.com/73333666.

36. The erasure of Israel in this rendering of the map in AMP’s conference poster inversely mirrors Israeli maps that suppress any reference to the Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and

37. For one such widely available commentarial context, see the searchable English version, Altafsir.com, “Tafsir al-Jalalayn,” trans. Feras Hamza, [https://www.altafsir.com/Tafsir.asp?tMadhNo=1&tTafsirNo=74&tSoraNo=17&tAyahNo=1&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=2](https://www.altafsir.com/Tafsir.asp?tMadhNo=1&tTafsirNo=74&tSoraNo=17&tAyahNo=1&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=2). For Arabic versions of other canonical commentaries, see, for example, Altafsir.com, “Interpretation of Jami’ al-Bayan fi Tafsir of the Qur’an/al-Tabari (d. 310 AH) [in Arabic],” [https://www.altafsir.com/Tafsir.asp?tMadhNo=1&tTafsirNo=1&tSoraNo=17&tAyahNo=1&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1](https://www.altafsir.com/Tafsir.asp?tMadhNo=1&tTafsirNo=1&tSoraNo=17&tAyahNo=1&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1), which links to al-Tabari’s *tafsir* of this passage (Qur’an 17:1).


42. See Cainkar, *Homeland Insecurity*, for details on the impact of the “War on Terror.”

43. Kristin Szremski, an AMP employee at the time, echoed the point concerning the need to educate the community about the Palestinian issue during our interview together in Chicago in October 2013.


45. The shaykh did not mention that Muslim policy protected Christians and Jews in these historical cases. After the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem in 637 CE, Christians retained their properties, right to worship, and a degree of self-governing autonomy. Salah al-Din, after conquering Jerusalem in 1187, offered generous terms to the Franks and invited Jews to return to Jerusalem, reversing the ban imposed against them by the Crusaders.

46. Anonymous Islamic activist, interview with author, Chicago, IL, 2 August 2010.

47. On syncretic secularity, see Eipper, “The Spectre of Godlessness,” p. 34.

48. Sawsan’s remark here reflects a broader and deeper historical dynamic related to discourses and practices of racial stratification and inclusion/exclusion in the United States. Arab Christian immigrants to the United States fought in the courts to count as “white” for purposes of attaining
citizenship during the early decades of the twentieth century. They were successful in this effort, and ever since Arab Americans have remained classified in these terms—for example, in the U.S. census. Socially and culturally, however, Arab Americans, both Christian and Muslim, have confronted often violent discrimination and exclusion—as nonwhite and even as Black (as signified, for example, in the slur, “sand n–––––”). For more on these issues, see Sarah M. A. Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White: Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian American Diaspora* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); and Amaney Jamal and Nadine Naber, eds., *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2008).

49. Sawsan (pseudonym), interview with the author, Chicago, IL, 27 February 2014.

50. For how the process has manifested in Palestine itself, see Lybarger, *Identity and Religion in Palestine*. 