THE FUNDAMENTALIST CITY?
Religiosity and the remaking of urban space

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Chapter 8

Abraham’s Urban Footsteps: Political Geography and Religious Radicalism in Israel/Palestine

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You are a traitor, absolutely! A traitor to your nation, religion, and country ... a traitor to the very reason your parents came here... Did you forget that this place is written in the Bible as ours not theirs?

Noam Arnon, speaker of Hebron Jews to an Israeli soldier evacuating Jewish settlers from the central Arab market, 8 July 2007

We have patience and Allah on our side; we have the Islamic Umma, from Pacific to Atlantic behind us; we shall get these invaders out one day; al-Chaleel belongs to the Palestinians, to the Muslims, but not to these criminal infidels.

Abd Al-Hai Arafah, Mufti of Hebron, 14 April 1969

Religious radicalism (often termed ‘fundamentalism’) has recently resurfaced as a major force in shaping politics, space, and violence. The hub of the current wave of religious mobilization lies in massive urban agglomerations, particularly at the rapidly burgeoning, impoverished, and often informal urban margins of the global South, such as São Paolo, Mexico City, Baghdad, Johannesburg, Cairo, and Istanbul. But these mobilizations are intertwined with older waves of religious politicizations, associated with ethno-national urban struggles, as found in Beirut, Jerusalem, Sarajevo, Belfast, Ahmedabad, Nicosia, or Hebron. This is vividly revealed in the above quotations, where religion, nationalism, and class overlap to shape the political geography of radical religious mobilization.
Our chapter offers a first step in writing about such a political geography or religious radicalism, which, we suggest, is closely linked to the depth of ‘urban colonialism’. Religious radicalism, whether state-sanctioned ‘from above’, or an articulation of resistance ‘from below’, is intertwined with the process of urban colonialism, in which colonized populations are racialized, humiliated and materially exploited. Based on the experience of Israel/Palestine, and focusing mainly on Jewish spatial politics, we suggest that these urban colonialisms have created fertile ground for the rise of religious radicalism as part of the struggle between collective identities for control of urban space.

To illustrate the argument, the chapter analyzes in brief the dynamics of ethno-religious politics in three key cities in Israel/Palestine, all bearing the symbolic footprints of Abraham, the mythical father of Jews and Muslims: Hebron, Jerusalem, and Beer Sheva. We show that the state’s ‘ethnocratic’ urban geopolitical policies, and the associated nature of urban colonialism, remain the main (albeit not sole) cause of religious conflict and radicalism. Our argument does not claim universality, but is rather aimed at a ‘meso’ level of generalization, relevant mainly to states forcefully promoting ‘ethnocratic’ projects. Hence, rather than seeing Israel/Palestine as an exception, we wish to place it as an emblem – a hyper example of processes underway in other cities and contexts.

The resurfacing of religion as a force of mass mobilization runs against the grain of mainstream Western (universalizing) academic analysis. However, when religion does appear in mainstream scholarship and popular discourse, it is portrayed as a ‘dark horse’, potentially harbouring evil forces such as ‘fundamentalism’, messianic colonialism, ‘jihadism’, and, of course, global terrorism. We take issue with such approaches which separate religion from the working of modernity and the modern nation-state. We show that religious radicalism often derives from the very identity projects instigated by modern nation-states and the social and economic conditions they have created. Hence, we suggest rethinking the taken-for-granted link between religious ‘fundamentalism’, globalization, and ‘civilizational wars’ (Huntington, 1996; Almond et al., 2003). To be sure, globalization has had a major impact, not least in shaping most political frameworks over the past two centuries – including nationalism, capitalism, economic colonialism, and class action. However, we observe that most radical religious mobilizations have been tied to either national territorial struggles or conditions of urban marginality, rather than to globally oriented campaigns.

Prior to expanding on this argument, let us touch on terminology. Despite the closeness of the two terms, we prefer ‘religious radicalism’ to ‘fundamentalism’, because ‘radicalism’ explicitly addresses the politics of religion, as religious radicals attempt to impose a new order on society. Because our emphasis in this chapter is on urban politics, we think ‘radicalism’ better describes, and without bias, the intent of some religious movements to get ‘to the root (= radic)’ of the social-cosmic order, and impose their own politicized religious vision on pluralistic societies.

Fundamentalism, on the other hand, is a term laden with popular derogatory meaning, fuelled by the recent neoconservative ‘war on terror’ and a secularist-leftist disdain of religiosity. ‘Fundamentalism’ denotes a modern phenomenon driven by a vision of religious purity, often as a response to crisis or threat (Silberstein, 1993). It rests on a reinterpretation of sacred texts (Almond et al., 2003), but not necessarily with a political agenda. As Martin and Appleby (1991) note, fundamentalists seek to “fight back”, fight for “the truth”, fight with particularly chosen repository of sources, fight against other and fight under God’. The boundaries of fundamentalist groups are often rigid, and their discourse inflexible and messianic.

By ‘ethnocracy’ we mean a regime type whereby the state is appropriated by a dominant ethno-national group, and is used to advance its own ‘ethnicizing’ political and territorial agendas over contested space and power structures. ‘Religious movements’ are a form of societal organization, aiming to politicize and institutionalize a divine order based on sacred texts and traditions. Religious movements use their ‘goods of salvation’ (Bourdieu, 1991), and commonly elevate a theocratic ‘order of things’ in direct competition with other grids of modern societal organization, such as democracy, civil society, and in some cases nationalism.

Israel/Palestine

The political geography of the land began to change dramatically during the British Mandate period with the massive arrival of Jewish immigrants and refugees fleeing persecution in Europe and (later) oppression in the Arab world. In its early decades the Zionist movement was mainly non-Orthodox (often termed ‘secular’) and nationalist, and was seen by many as a rebellion against traditional Judaism. But at the same time it harboured deep-seated, religiously inspired, and even messianic concepts regarding Jewish salvation through a return to Zion – the promised biblical land (Raz-Krakotzkin, 2002). Accordingly, it laid claim to the entire ‘Eretz Yisrael’ (Land of Israel/Palestine) between Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea, while Arabs, who were the majority on the land, resisted the Zionist project by establishing a fledgling Palestinian national movement. Tensions between
the two movements escalated, and the British decided to leave. In 1947 the
Zionist movement accepted a UN partition plan which allocated 55 per cent
of the land to a Jewish state, which was rejected outright by the Arab
leadership. The ensuing 1948 war saw widespread ethnic cleansing, during
which some two-thirds of the Palestinians lost their homes and land, and
were driven to regions beyond what later became Israel’s internationally
recognized border, the Green Line (figure 8.1).

Following the war, Israel was established as an ethnocratic Jewish state
(Yiftachel and Ghanem, 2004), and imposed ethnic rule within its sovereign
territory, now 78 per cent of Israel/Palestine. Palestinians meanwhile found
themselves dispersed and under the jurisdiction of five neighbouring states.
Israel then began a concerted project of internal colonialism, known as the
Judaization policy, and built more than five hundred settlements and cities
in areas previously inhabited by Palestinians, including Jewish Beer Sheva.
The state brought 96 per cent of its land under Jewish-Israeli ownership.
Palestinian Arabs were awarded Israeli citizenship, but were placed under
military government until 1966, and were subsequently marginalized and
dispossessed by the nascent state.

The role of religion in state affairs was at that time relatively minor, but
still significant; a division of power allowed religious authorities to preside
over personal life, public culture, and religious affairs, institutionalizing a
permanent theocratic presence in the Israeli regime. Religious parties
participated in all government coalitions, and renewed connections with
world Jewry, which began to provide financial and political support to the
warring state, and strengthened its religious dimensions.

In 1967 Israel conquered the West Bank and Gaza (including Jerusalem
and Hebron), and continued its Judaization project by settling nearly half a
million Jews over the Green Line – that is, beyond its sovereign area. Here
religious groups assumed even greater importance, because the new
territories, and especially the West Bank, are dotted with sacred Jewish-
biblical sites. These religious elements soon began a massive settlement
project, including Arab Jerusalem and Hebron as key targets. As part of this
push, throughout the occupied territories (i.e.) Jewish settlers retained
their full citizenship rights, while Palestinians were disenfranchised and
subject to military rule. At the same time, Israel unilaterally annexed Old
and East Jerusalem to the Israeli municipality, and began a massive effort to
Judaize these areas (see figure 8.4). Due to the ‘urban annexation’,
Jerusalemites Palestinians received residency rights and Israeli ID cards (but
not citizenship), despite the fact that under international law East Jerusalem
remained part of the occupied West Bank.

Figure 8.1. Ethnic geography of Israel/Palestine, 2005, and Abraham footsteps.
(Source: Yiftachel, 2006, p. 74)
Notably, in 2005, after two bloody Palestinian rebellions, Israel evacuated the Gaza Strip, and for the first time willingly dismantled twenty-five Jewish settlements in the area it considers its historical homeland. Yet, the Judaization of Jerusalem and the West Bank has continued. And now, in response to accelerating cycles of mutual violence and terror, Israel is erecting a massive separation barrier (‘the Wall’), which effectively transfers 10 per cent of the West Bank to Israel. In 2005 the barrier (and all Israel’s colonial settlements in the West Bank) were condemned as ‘clear violations’ of international law by the international court in The Hague.

Since 1948 the Israeli state has pursued a colonial project of expanding and deepening Jewish control over all parts of the contested land, and against the wishes of local populations. However, we must differentiate between the various depths of colonization which have resulted from the gradual, incomplete, and contested imposition of Jewish rule. Whereas in Hebron the Jewish presence is based on a heavily militarized occupation and settlement vis-à-vis rebellious, rightless Palestinians, in Jerusalem the edge of the systematic and powerful colonial project is somewhat blunted by the partial civil status of the Palestinians. Meanwhile, in the Beer Sheva region, Judaization has been accompanied by the endowment of the local Bedouin population with citizenship and some legal, political, and urban development rights. While the Judaization logic proceeds in all three cities and results in conspicuous inequalities, we wish to argue that the variation of the political geography of urban colonialism does make a significant difference, intra-ala, for the nature of urban religious radicalism.

This brings us to the issue of religious politics, mainly in the form of Orthodox Jewish parties and groups. These groups have steadily increased their power base within the Zionist state, particularly since the 1970s. This has been the upshot of Israel’s colonial push, which allowed religious groups to claim a ‘frontier’ position in the Zionist project both discursively and physically. Later, intensifying Palestinian violence ‘confirmed’ the religious narrative of the Jewish people in its perpetual struggle against hostile nations, further augmenting religious political power.

Through the middle and later decades of the twentieth-century Zionist ideology – which traditionally treated ‘Jewishness’ ambiguously as ethnic, national, and religious – became increasingly theocratic. And the influence of religious parties within the Israeli polity reached a peak during the 1990s, as religious parties won some 30 per cent of the Israeli parliament in the 1996 elections. Since then, however, a growing chasm has developed between Orthodox and ‘secular’ (non-Orthodox) Jews. The joint Zionist framework still holds the two camps together around the goal of containing what they construct as a common enemy; but serious cracks have opened since the mid-1990s. This is reflected in growing cultural and geographic polarization, highlighted by the fact that nearly all West Bank settlers are now Orthodox or ultra-Orthodox, as opposed to the 1980s when the settlements had a far greater presence of non-Orthodox Jews. At the same time, other portions of Israeli society have become increasingly liberal, secular, and globalized.

The tension between ‘secular’ Jews (70–75 per cent of the Jewish population) and their Orthodox counterparts has now become one of the most volatile issues in Zionism – with the territorial question of controlling Palestinian space at its very heart. In this vein, it is illustrative that the fall of the last five Israeli governments was caused by religious (or religious nationalist) political elements, who vehemently opposed government attempts to advance toward negotiations with the Palestinians, because they would necessitate, in their eyes, relinquishing parts of the sacred homeland.

The most notable event was the 1995 assassination of Itzhak Rabin by a religious Jew, which derailed these peace efforts. Yet all four prime ministers since – Shimon Peres, Binyamin Netanyahu, Ehud Barak, and Ariel Sharon – were toppled, or critically weakened, by nationalist-religious elements of Israeli politics in response to what they perceived as tampering with the sanctity of religious-national space.

A process of religious radicalization has also recently emerged among Palestinians in recent times, with even greater intensity and venom. The PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization) was for years the most secular national movement in the Arab world, maintaining a relatively democratic representation among political factions (Hilal, 2006). And since 1994, Fatah has been the main force behind the nascent Palestinian Authority (PA), which received limited autonomy in governing about 40 per cent of the OT, or 10 per cent of historic Palestine. The institutional design of the PA, too, followed a relatively typical secular structure, with a supporting legal and military apparatus (Hilal, 2006; Ghanem, 2000).

During the 1980s, however, the influence of a new wave of Middle East Islamism, in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution, and as a result of a lack of development, widespread poverty, and Israel’s brutal measures in putting down Palestinian resistance, created fertile grounds for the emergence of Hamas (the hard-line Islamic resistance movement) and several allied small religious factions. In only two decades Hamas has become the most dominant force in Palestinian politics, using a mixture of Islamist and nationalist rhetoric, and launching a campaign of unprecedented violence and suicide terror against Israel.
Towards a Political Geography of Religious Radicalism

We wish to advance several related theoretical arguments, as inspired by a neo-Gramscian perspective highlighting the links between systems of material and political domination and issues of culture, class, and identity (Laclau, 1994; Hall, 1992). This perspective conceptualizes political regimes as seeking to construct a hegemonic status, in which the domination of a particular system of beliefs and values becomes a 'taken-for-granted' truth. The ethnocratic and theocratic mobilizations that are at the centre of our inquiry, are prototype hegemonic projects. At times, these projects conflict (Lustick, 2002), but in other circumstances they may reinforce one another. We are also inspired by (post)colonial scholarship (Samaddar, 2002; Roy, 2009; Shenhar, 2006) to extend the neo-Gramscian framework in two principal ways. First, we note that hegemonic projects may be seriously challenged by the 'stubborn realities' of exclusion and oppression in which the life of the subaltern Other is embedded (Bayat, 2000; Chatterjee, 2004). In other words, and in contrast to mainstream liberal, or critical Foucauldian perspectives, we discern a persistent presence of politicized groups falling 'outside' the nets of control cast by societal powers. In other words, the mechanisms of state co-optation and discourses of governmentality lack the capacity to incorporate these populations, causing long-term instability and presenting challenges to state authorities. Second, we introduce the critical importance of spatial processes to the construction of and challenge to hegemony (Massey, 2005). As shown below, these are not merely backdrops on which the drama of religious radicalism unfolds, but active factors creating the conditions for such drama.

Our argument begins by illuminating the historical moment in which the relationship between ethno-national and religious mobilizations is mutually reinforcing. We claim that in certain 'South Eastern' (non-Western) regions of the world, following the imposition of state nationalism on a pre-existing web of affiliations, religion re-emerged as a supportive, yet subordinant, force within the ethno-national project. The winds of secularism which were carried with the diffusion of nationalism pushed religion to the sideline, and a new conceptual grid was popularized around an 'unbroken connection' between nations and 'their' land. In several regions, such as the Soviet Bloc, Europe, and East Asia, the nationalist order totally replaced religion by a system of centralized anti-religious oppression. But in others, such as the Middle East, South Asia, and Eastern Europe, the national order became dominant, but the shadow of deeply rooted religious traditions remained.

During the period of anti-colonial struggle and the associated nation-building project, some religions reappeared as instruments of the ethno-national projects. We conceptualize these as 'ethnic religions', reined in to fortify the process of ethnocratic nation-building both in response to colonial power and, equally importantly, against minorities who staked alternative claims to power and resources. Sri Lankan Buddhism, Zionist Judaism, Indian Hinduism, Palestinian Islamism, and Irish Catholicism are but a few examples. We use the term 'ethnic', in preference to 'national', here to highlight the construction of 'the nation' under ethnocratic regimes. These constructions often work actively against the creation of a civic nation, and are often buttressed, as we shall see below, by religious myths, practices, and institutions.

Here we need to pause and make some qualifications. First, we do not claim that religion is merely an instrument of regime power. We acknowledge its existence as a major societal force with its own grids of meaning, aesthetics, and politics, which can be studied from a variety of angles. Second, we acknowledge that there exists a variety of powerful forces shaping religious radicalism beyond the urban geopolitics on which we focus. And third, the literature on the rise of religious movements accounts for a range of important factors relating to their emergence, such as resources, organization, leadership, ideology, and tactics.

At this stage it may also be useful to advance and make an analytical distinction between religious radicalism 'from above', and 'from below'. The former, on which this chapter mainly focuses, is augmented - explicitly, or, more commonly, implicitly - by the state's identity project, with religious institutions functioning as 'gate keepers' to screen out the 'wrong' groups from full membership and power. The latter ('from below') is generally a form of coping with, and resisting, the oppression applied by the state or other powerful forces affecting people's deprivation and marginality. This often appears in the form of constructing counter-hegemonic religious discourses (Davis, 2006; Finke, 2003; Ram, 1996).

We recognize, of course, that the distinction is malleable, and that circumstances may change the 'above-below' positioning, as in the case of Iran or Afghanistan. Yet, the distinction is helpful in illuminating both the
forces generating radicalism and – critically – the active involvement of the state in producing its own radicalism.

**Religion and Expansion**

The cooperation between ethno-nationalist and theocratic forces is pronounced when states are engaged in (external or internal) 'ethnocratic' colonial projects (Yiftachel and Ghanem, 2004). It may be so in development efforts that direct the flow of capital to a dominant group (often through the exploitation of minority labour); in settlement initiatives that claim ethnic control over contested territories (McGarry, 1998; Newman, 1997); in the articulation of historical, archaeological, and cultural discourses supporting expansionist territorial claims; or in unequal governance systems imposed on certain regions. Examples of state colonial projects abound. Among them are the Sri Lankan Dry Area resettlement; the Russification of the Baltic States; the Malaysian 'new-village' initiative aimed at dispersing Chinese to the south; the Judaization of the West Bank, Galilee, and Negev; the Bantustanization of apartheid South Africa; or the long-term exploitation by Britain of the Celtic fringe (McGarry, 1998).

In such a context, religious frameworks 'ground' sanctity in space by providing a divine (and hence indisputable) narrative of territorial belonging. Isaac (1960) was among the first to write about the inherent spatialities of most organized religions. Smith (2000) and Shilhav (1991) have also shown how religious spatiality is often intertwined with the symbolic and geographical underpinning of ethnic nationalism. As elaborated by Cooper (1992), political power is often behind the delineation and sanctification of space, commonly using a strategic 'selection' of religious narratives and myths. And Jackson and Henrie (1983) have developed a hierarchy of spatial sanctity, at the top of which are sacred sites, followed by the national homeland as a sanctified 'geobody', and specific historical sites reinforcing the collective story. In cases of ethnic conflict, religious narratives tend to become ever more radical, as new interpretations of sacred texts surface, supporting archaeological findings come to light, or new religious zeal emerges to exclude 'less pure' groups from using the 'promised' or divine space (Abu el-Haj, 2001; Silberman, 2001; Mann, 1999b; Sibley, 1995).

Akenstone (1992) shows convincingly how Protestants in Northern Ireland, Afrikaans in South Africa, and Zionists in Israel/Palestine have relied on ancient texts and narratives of selection, covenant, and territory to justify oppressive forms of racism. In the case of sacred sites, religion provides the state with a particular geography of salvation, which also functions as a popular, strategic, and emotional foundation for expansionism. As perceptively claimed by a recent study:

The political content of sanctity and the sacred content of power are essential to urban sociology ... and to the analysis of religio-political conflicts. We must understand the sacred as a necessary constituent of power. Sacred centers are not only ideas or symbols, but act as moral sanction for denying the rights of the Other. (Friedland and Hecht, 2007, p. 19)

Further, the apparatus of the modern ethnocratic state conveniently uses religious categories and classifications to create social boundaries and prohibitions, with the aim of maintaining ethnic 'purity' and dominance. The use of Dutch Reform doctrines in the case of the South African apartheid state is well known. Similarly, in ethnic states such as Greece, Armenia, Israel, Serbia, and Iran, the state ranks religious identities, prohibits civil marriages, and allocates unequal resources to members of minority religions. Hence, ethnocratic and religious mobilization have often reinforced one another, to the mutual benefit of both state and church.

**Cracks in Expansionist Identity Politics**

The argument is, however, more complicated. We wish to raise here the factors of time and historical momentum, which expose an inherent tension – if not long-term contradiction – between the logics of the ethnocratic state and religious mobilization. Such tension often emerges precisely as a result of cooperation between the two, as the two 'camps' rely on each other to strengthen their social and political bases and develop rival long-term political projects. This tension has the potential to destabilize political systems, as seen in Sri Lanka, India, Sudan, and Lebanon, to name a few examples. Importantly for the current analysis, such tension often rises in struggles over the production and management of urban space.

There are two central and related elements involved. The first is the metaphysical discourse of destiny. The goal of ethnocrats, who form the mainstay of national and political leadership, is to control a state apparatus. They play according to the contemporary political-geographical 'rules of the game' – namely, that each nation can control 'its own' territory and people, but only its territory and people. Given this caveat, ethnocratic elites attempt – with the aid of theocrats – to maximize control over their ethnocratic-ethnic group, whether vis-à-vis neighbouring states (as in the case of
border disputes or irredentist moves, such as in India, Israel, or Cyprus), or vis-à-vis minorities within ‘their’ states (Mann, 2002; McGarry and O’Leary, 2004).

At the same time, religious movements, now empowered by the state, continue to pursue their own visions of ultimate destiny, redemption, and salvation. These transcend the horizons of the modern state, and challenge its territorial, cultural, and political limits. Theocratic visions abound, but they invariably aspire to lead the population toward a messianic, cosmic order of total and global victory against the infidels. For theocrats, contemporary states are but a necessary and temporary step in the direction of ultimate salvation (Almond et al., 2003).

There is no room here to elaborate on this important point, except to note that it often presents a serious challenge to the modern state, evident in urban politics and the daily discourses of religious communities. Here the cities of Hebron and Old Jerusalem are highly illustrative – both lying beyond the borders of the state of Israel, yet constructed as ‘essential’ for the fulfilment of Jewish religious salvation. In such locations the embedded tensions surface into open conflict between states and ‘their own’ religious movements. These tensions do not only revolve around territorial issues, but address a range of matters, affecting all spheres of human life, from the body, dress, neighbourhood, and urban landscapes, to issues of food, festivals, and gender relations.

The second locus of tension between theocrats and states tends to develop around the construction of citizenship. States typically aspire to legitimacy – both internal and international – and hence construct a discourse of equal citizenship, supported by a legal and institutional apparatus. In practice, equal citizenship remains a theoretical and rarely implemented vision. Yet, in contrast, religious movements attempt to replace the discursive and regulative frameworks of equality with a hierarchical system of affiliations based on religious doctrine and customs.

This has adverse consequences on a range of social markers, most notably women (traditionally marginalized and disempowered by religious doctrines) and minorities (either of different religions or of the ‘wrong’ sects within the dominant religion). In that way, religious movements may attempt to undo a basic construct of the modern state – equal citizenship. When translated to the quotidian practices of government, the fracturing of citizenship ruptures the idea of the ‘demos’ – a body of equally empowered citizens. It therefore presents a long-term challenge to state legitimacy and stability. To illustrate the ethnocentric-theocratic relations-cum-tension we turn to an old Chinese fable:

On a cold stormy day, a lizard tries to get into a fox’s warren for shelter. Worried, the fox rallies a friend – the stork – to bring water in its beak, drop it at the warren’s entrance, and thus prevent the lizard from entering. In return the fox offers the stork warm shelter from the storm. Once successful against the persistent lizard, the stork suddenly realizes that if it continues to pour water, the fox too will be forced out of the warren, and the stork will have it all for itself.

The fable’s moral is about carefully calculating who is invited to one’s home. For our purposes, we can liken the ethnic state to the fox, the lizard to the neighbouring ‘enemy’ or a minority of competing nationality, and the stork to religion. The fable illustrates well the dynamic of allies becoming rivals, with a momentum of time and power. It also shows how in such instances space becomes pivotal – with such conflicts over ‘home’ being grounded within specific geographies of contestation, most notably urban ones. This leads to our next section, which focuses on how the forces of expansion and domination described above are present in the heart of the city.

And the Urban?

The final part of our argument connects the above observations to the urban scene. By virtue of being the growth poles of most societies, urban regions are the point of encounter between diverse groups. It is here that group relations are ‘concretized’ through the intersection of state, global, and local forces (Lefebvre, 1996). Urban dynamics regularly shape the distribution of material, political, and symbolic resources, turning cities into sites of political contestation, articulation, and mobilization.

But the modern urban scene, by its very dynamism, size, and diversity, harbours a multitude of possibilities. On the one hand, it enables movement and porosity across social and spatial boundaries, unimaginable in rural or traditional societies. The spatial proximity and the quotidian economic and political interactions between groups often create new and dynamic identities and shifting cross-cutting coalitions (Tajbakhsh, 2002; Katznelson, 1996). On the other hand, precisely because of this potential mobility, it is in cities that we find severe forms of social control and surveillance, to combat the ‘danger’ of social mixing and political dynamism (Wilson, 1995). Hence, a range of control measures is often invented and implemented in urban areas, typically involving housing segregation, uneven land allocation, municipal gerrymandering, uneven investment in infrastructure, jobs, and transport, and efforts to disenfranchise rapidly growing swaths of informal urban settlement (Marcuse, 1995; Robinson, 2006). In polarized cities, deep
social (and ethnic) difference, growing economic inequalities, and control mechanisms may thus create new colonial conditions.

It is against these urban processes that we find the rise of religious radicalism. Here, immigration, deprivation, and regulative controls interact with national and global powers. We contend that the deeper the ‘footprints’ of urban colonialism, the more prevalent the rise of religious radicalism. In this formulation, ‘urban colonialism’ may be understood as the management of urban regions according to a colonial logic, whereby a dominant group controls the political space in order to exploit the region’s material advantages and labour force, impose a system of unequal membership based on a ranking of ascriptive identities and economic positions, and manage political opportunity by restricting free movement and participation.

Urban colonialism is a dynamic and inevitably contested process. In cases where colonialism is highly institutionalized, as in Jerusalem, the regime may be defined as ‘urban apartheid’. But in most cases, such as Beer Sheva, urban colonialism remains a process if the making – undeclared, and practiced through more subtle discursive, material, and regulative means. But ‘the urban’ is still a vast field, and it may take some additional distinctions – as ‘navigation grids’, rather than strict dichotomies – to steer through the messy seas of urban political geography.

First, we should distinguish between cities that are subject to conflicts over territorial collective identity (national, ethnic) and those where the question of sovereignty has been settled (for the time being). Clearly, urban colonialism has a sharper, more volatile, and more violent edge in cities such as Jerusalem, Beirut, Ahmedabad, Sarajevo, or Colombo, where ‘the urban’ is closely intertwined with ‘the national’ as a site of struggle over sovereignty or ethnic self-determination. In such cases urban segregation is deeper, and space becomes a zero-sum territorial resource, often subject to bitter struggle. This is different from the more fluid and porous situations in cities composed of massive, often informal, settlements, where conflict arises out of economic and political deprivation. The struggle appears in such cities to be ‘within’, rather than ‘between’, national or ethnic collectivities.

Another important distinction should be made between holy urban sites and ‘sacralized’ urban areas. Holy sites are constructed by elites as key locations of memory and identity, promoted to serve the contemporary identity project. Major holy sites may often form the basis for the growth of an entire urban area, as in the case of the Vatican, Jerusalem, or Mecca. Sacralized urban areas, on the other hand, are those created through the empowerment of religious movements in marginalized urban areas. These are the work of contemporary religio-political entrepreneurs, who often impose a religious order on a pre-existing urban landscape, typically in terms of street life, commerce, dress code, and forms of public morality. These are more dynamic and expansive than holy sites, though less steeped in spatial and historical sanctity. What interests us here particularly is the first type – where religious radicalism ‘from above’ advances colonialism, which over time generates a counter-movement of religious radicalism ‘from below’. Again, the two are not mutually exclusive, but present different core dynamics in the shaping of religious radicalism.

Our argument is now beginning to synthesize. It is in key urban areas imbued with great national, historical, or religious importance that the theocratic agenda brushes most forcefully against the state’s civil agenda. This is where attempts may arise to make the ethno-nationalist project more theocratic: by promoting and then colonizing new, old, or invented holy sites; seizing and developing ‘enemy’ space; constructing walls; and staging provocative events, such as marches, holiday celebrations, and street blockades. Through this spatial and political process, and the associated ‘radicalizing religious moves’, religious groups attempt to accumulate symbolic and political capital within ‘their’ ethno-nationalist project, at the expense of the excluded ‘others’, and in competition with other elements within their nation.

Adding to this basis for conflict is the fact that cities are centres of globalizing economic development, where elites reside in close proximity to marginalized labourers – the unemployed, the informal, and the illegal. In many cases this creates a double movement, whereby conflict is exacerbated by both religious-nationalist radicalism and economic segregation. Religious and radical nationalist groups often agitate against urban minorities through development, planning, or housing initiatives, while the political economy of globalizing urban development typically deepens the deprivation of the same groups. These have spawned phenomena such as ghettos, informalities, and ‘floating’ populations, for whom organized minority religions offer security and meaning in the midst of urban turmoil.

It is here, as depicted in figure 8.2, that we find the political geography of religious radicalism, born out of both the spatial struggles within the ethno-nationalist project, and the material and political struggles between the dominant ethnic nation and ethnic and religious minorities. In cases where these forces persist over time we find a process of ‘negative dialectic’ operating along several axes, causing intro-alia, the radicalization of religious politics from ‘above’ and ‘below’. The polarization typically occurs in situations of long-term unresolved collective conflict, whereby religious agendas may be gradually introduced to buttress the territorial and spatial
struggles between rival groups. This is the birth of the most radical forms of religious mobilization, as evident in Beirut, Jerusalem, Hebron, Mumbai, Colombo, Baghdad, and Belfast.

It is beyond our scope here to sketch the rich details of the process of religious mobilization, whereby frameworks of identity are imbued with religious significance and redemptive zeal, often as alternatives to state-induced or globalizing trends. It will suffice at this stage to point to good research on the subject which highlights the process both among the state-sanctioned groups occupying ‘the frontier’ (Ram, 1996; Eldar and Zertal, 2004; Bartholomeusz and de Silva, 1998; Winslow, 1984) and among the resisting weaker groups who search for empowering frameworks to help them cope with urban colonialism and prepare the ground for their own political ascendency (Budeiri, 1995; Hatina, 2005; Davis, 2006).

We can now turn to an examination of the three Abrahamic cities, highlighting the political geographical forces at work, and focusing on the depth of urban colonialism and religious radicalism.

The Geopolitics of Abraham’s Cities

Abraham is the mythical father of both Islam and Judaism. The three cities examined here define Abraham’s constitutive biblical journey through the Promised Land, marking its mythical early ‘geopolitical’. As such, the three cities possess similar urban religious-national significance.

Abraham, according to the sacred texts, first settled in Beer Sheva. He then travelled to Jerusalem for his son Isaac’s sacrifice on Temple Mount—the site where both the Jewish Temples and al-Aqsa Mosque were later built. Abraham, and his wife Sarah, were later buried in Hebron, so the narrative goes, on land purchased in full from local inhabitants.

As shown below, while the three cities are located along a short, 80 km route (figure 8.1), they are also set in different political geographical circumstances.

Hebron: Militarized Religious Utopia

Due to the location of the sacred Abraham’s Tomb, Hebron (Hevron in Hebrew, al-Chaleel in Arabic) was considered one of the four ‘holy cities’ for pre-Zionist Judaism. A small Jewish minority lived within the predominantly Arab city from the sixteenth century onwards, until Jews were evicted following a 1929 riot, in which sixty-seven Jews were killed. Following the 1948 war Hebron was annexed to Jordan.

Shortly after Israel’s conquest of the West Bank, during Passover 1968, the first group of religious Jews, led by Rabbi Levyner, invaded an empty city hotel in defiance of government orders. Thus began four decades of an urban colonial project, which has often run against the grain of Israeli policy but has nevertheless received state protection. To date, it has managed to attract some 7,500 Jewish settlers to the city and the abutting colonial town of Kiryat Arba (Swiesa, 2003; OCHA, 2005) (see figure 8.3). Hebron is the only West Bank Arab city (outside Jerusalem) in which Jews settled. During the last four decades it has represented an extreme case of religiously and nationally motivated colonization that has explicitly attempted to push the boundaries of the Zionist regime from ethnocracy to theocracy.

Early settlement rhetoric in Hebron mixed religious promise for a Jewish Abraham’s city, nationalistic claims to control the entire Land of Israel, and personal claims to retrieve Jewish property lost in 1929. Religious Jews occupied parts of the city in persistent challenge to the government’s attempt to arrive at a more ‘strategic’ or ‘rational’ colonial policy that would avoid direct confrontation within Arab cities (Newman, 2001). The settlers remained, however, full Israeli citizens, deep in the occupied West Bank, and received on-going, and highly costly, military protection. By contrast, in 1967 the city’s 140,000 Palestinian residents were placed under military rule, with no political standing to affect Israeli policies governing their own city.
With expanding Jewish colonization in parts of the Old City, and the construction of large-scale housing in Kiryat Arba, relations between the two ethnic communities polarized. A violent nadir was reached in 1994 when a Jewish settler massacred twenty-nine Muslim worshippers inside the sacred Abraham's Tomb. Hostilities have since continued, and it is estimated that during the last seven years some 123 Palestinian residents and nine Jews have been killed (B'tselem, 2007).

On 4 May 1999, the Wye Agreement saw the city effectively partitioned: the eastern part was placed under ('temporary') direct Israeli control, while the western parts were vested with the Palestinian Authority (PA) as 'Area A'—with autonomous control. In 2002, following a wave of Palestinian terror aimed at ending the on-going occupation, Israel reinvaded the city. Today, Hebron is governed by the PA but under tight Israeli control, the level of which depends on Israel's self-declared 'military considerations'.

The political geography of Hebron can thus be portrayed as a brutally colonized and occupied city with municipal autonomy for the city's Arab western parts. Economic development has been severely hampered by an occupation regime of road blocks, closures, and curfews and by tight control of Arab building construction. Since 2000, the economy of Arab Hebron, like the rest of the OT, has seriously deteriorated, with parts of the region reporting unemployment higher than 50 per cent and near subsistence levels of physical existence (OCHA, 2005). Meanwhile, the Jewish part has remained well developed, due to near full employment and generous state subsidies which are available to Israeli citizens only.

It is not surprising then that under such colonial settings, religious radicalism has thrived, both 'from above' and later 'from below'. The discourse of Jewish settlers has accordingly evolved over the years. During the 1970s it mixed religious, nationalist, and secularist components, led by the writings of Elyakim Ha'etzni and later by his son Nadav—two of the city's prominent figures. The main argument was that Hebron is the ultimate frontier of Zionism, and that retreat from the city will signal the fall of the entire settlement project. During the 1980s, however, and increasingly during 2000s, radical religious rhetoric has taken centre stage, portraying Hebron as a place where the 'covenant' between God and nation is fulfilled through the sacred deed of settling the Land of Israel (Eretz Yisrael) (now a euphemism for the Palestinian territories). The city has thus also become a site for on-going pilgrimages—organized tours, and festivals attended by tens of thousands of (mainly Orthodox) Jews every year, especially around the Jewish holidays.

*Figure 8.3. Hebron and Kiryat Arba: Jewish settlement in the city of Hebron. (Source: B'tselem, 2007)*

Local politics have reflected this change. During the 1970s and even the 1980s, nationalist parties polled fairly well in Hebron and Kiryat Arba. However, in the 2006 elections the shift to a theocratic agenda became increasingly clear, with 77 per cent of residents voting for one of Israel's four main religious parties—Mafdal, Gush Emunim, Agudah, and Shas. This was mirrored on the Palestinian side, with Hamas polling 59 per cent, and
winning all nine seats in the 2006 Palestinian elections. This was Hamas's strongest political showing, overshadowing even the landslide victory in Gaza.

The multiple dialectics created by the violent Jewish settlement in Hebron well illustrate the political geography of radicalism, bringing to sharp relief various dimensions of conflict: between settlers and state; between settlers and the Palestinian national movement; and between Islamic Palestinian groups, mainly representing the city's poor and refugees, and the more secular and middle-class Palestinian mainstream.

**Jerusalem: The Conflicting Embodiment of Two Ethnocracies**

Jerusalem (‘Yerushalayim’ in Hebrew; ‘al-Quds’ in Arabic), and particularly the Old City and within it Temple Mount, are the epicentre of the Zionist-Palestinian conflict. These small areas, not surprisingly, are also constructed as signalling the deepest attachment of the two nations to their homelands. It is here that Judaism and Islam frame and ‘ground’ identities around particular places, thereby fuelling the strong senses of geopoity within two national movements.

The city’s biblical past tells of two temples built on the Mount as the central places of worship for Israelite and Judaic communities. The temples signal a ‘golden past’ for the construction of the modern Zionist narrative. ‘Zion’ concurrently means Jerusalem and the entire homeland (much like al-Sham and Masser, denoting Damascus/Syria and Cairo/Egypt, respectively). Islamic myth sites Mohammad’s ascent to heaven from the same temple site, and has long held Jerusalem as one of Islam’s most holy places. Its Arabic name, al-Quds, means simply ‘the holy’. Since the 1920s it has become a centre of the Palestinian quest for sovereignty and the designated capital of a future Palestinian state. To complicate matters further, Jerusalem is where Jesus is believed to have been crucified, making the city one of the holiest places for Christianity.

Due to its global significance, the 1947 UN partition plan designated Jerusalem as a ‘corpus separatus’, to be governed by an international entity. In 1948 Old (East) Jerusalem was captured by Jordan, and its 3,000 Jewish residents were forced out. Following the 1967 war, Israel annexed 70 km² from the West Bank, including the 6 km² Jordanian city of Jerusalem and a host of nearby territories and villages, creating a large metropolis. The Muslim holy sites remained under the management of the Waqf (the Islamic religious authority).

Over the four decades since, Israel has conducted a massive project of urban Judaization, settling some 180,000 Jews beyond the Green Line (that is, illegally, in occupied territory now titled ‘Jerusalem’). This has been accompanied by large-scale land confiscation from local Arabs, thereby producing highly conspicuous gaps between the well-developed and serviced Jewish development and the largely impoverished and underserviced Arab neighbourhoods. Segregation remains very high, and movement across ethnic boundaries quite rare (figure 8.4).

Over the same period, the Arab population more than doubled, reaching 240,000 in 2006. Israeli and Palestinian towns and villages, on both sides of the extended city boundary, were functionally incorporated into the metropolis through urban development. This process saw the rise of informal development mostly in the Arab sections. At present, the population of metropolitan Jerusalem is estimated at 1.3 million, nearly twice that of the Old City.

Within the city boundaries, Israeli Jews enjoy full citizenship rights, while Palestinians (Jerusalemites) hold ‘Israeli resident’ status only, which separates them from West Bank Palestinians and entitles them to a range of welfare and mobility privileges. Despite self-identification as Palestinians, their political status has remained in limbo – being neither Israeli, nor fully Palestinian. These residents of Jerusalem have voted in small numbers (14-16 per cent) in Palestinian National elections, although polling booths were placed outside the city by Israeli decree. They have also been eligible to participate in Jerusalem municipal elections, but have largely shunned them, considering the city government to be an illegitimate, colonial body. Several key Jerusalemites have participated in the Palestinian government, including the late Faisal Husayn, Hana’ Ashrawi, and Ibrahim Abu Tur.

Religion has obviously played a central role in shaping the political geography of Jerusalem, not only because of the high concentration of holy sites, but also because the city's population traditionally had a high proportion of Orthodox Jews. This aspect has been covered by numerous studies (Dumper, 2002; Khemaissi, 2005; Benvenisti, 2002; Yiftachel and Yacobi, 2002), and need not be repeated. The main point here is to discern the link between the depth of urban colonialism and the level of religious radicalism. The latter has increased during the last decade, although not to the levels seen in Hebron. The reason, we argue, is the imposition of somewhat 'softer' urban colonialism, and the associated mobilizations both 'from above' and 'from below'.

Let us elaborate. The first two decades of colonial Judaization in Jerusalem were driven mainly by non-Orthodox ('secular') Jews, most
notably Jerusalem’s mayor for three decades, Teddy Kollek. His was a prototype ethnocentric project – using the historical and nationalist ‘weight’ of Jerusalem to expand Zionist development and territorial gains. Since the 1970s, electoral patterns among Jerusalemite Jews have generally reflected a right-of-centre nationalist and religious leaning, as illustrated by the 1984 national elections, when Likud received 34.2 per cent, the group of religious parties 38.5 per cent (about twice the national figure), and Labor a mere 12.6 per cent (less than half the national percentage). In city elections the situation has been even starker, with Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox parties receiving 44 per cent and 47 per cent in 1998 and 2003, respectively.

The Oslo process, which divided Hebron, deliberately avoided dealing with Jerusalem. It was considered one of the issues left for permanent settlement negotiations. As such, a process of ‘creeping apartheid’ – an increasingly institutionalized yet undeclared political order – has taken root in the city. The two Palestinian intifadas staged a record number of terrorist attacks in Jerusalem. But Israel has also used widespread violence and state terror to preserve its dominance (B’tselem, 2007; Cohen, 2007) and violence in Jerusalem has remained, to some extent, a national, rather than an urban, issue. The main urban control methods used by Israel have been severe, but somewhat softer than in the West Bank, revolving mainly around issues of municipal and land policies. These have included widespread land confiscation, denial of planning rights, economic deprivation, and house demolition. These tactics have shaped relations between Palestinians and the city more than state or Islamic terror (Margalit, 2001).

But the conflict over the city has continued to polarize and turn local populations towards religion. In recent years, the job of Judaizing Arab Jerusalem has been carried out almost entirely by religious Jews, either ultra-Orthodox families buying new apartments in rapidly developing Israeli colonies at the edge of the city, or by small radical groups who settle in the heart of Palestinian neighbourhoods. Two such groups, Atzet Kohanim (Priests’ Crown) and Elad Ir David (City of David), have received most of the recent attention. They are mainly young, ultra-Orthodox, and nationalist (‘Hardalim’) groups who use highly charged, ‘redemptive’ religious rhetoric. The religious shift is also noticeable electorally: in the 2006 elections the representation of Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox groups rose to twenty-four seats (24 per cent of the Jewish vote), while that of nonreligious parties declined to 76 per cent.

The separation of Jerusalemite politics from the general national and international hype about the city is, of course, impossible. However, in this chapter we are less interested in the latter, focusing more on religious politics in the city and less on the range of global and national religious groups who have mobilized around the sanctification of Jerusalem. But two such ‘external’ groups should be mentioned, as they feature heavily in the daily workings of the city. The first is the notable Jewish Orthodox messianic group Ne’emanei Har Habayit (Temple Mount Loyalists), which is constantly mobilizing to allow Jews to pray at the Temple Mount, and which also aspires to build a synagogue there. Their proposals are often debated by the city administration, religious courts, and the state government, and during the Camp David summit (2000) Israel even submitted a formal proposal to build such a synagogue.

Among the Palestinians, too, messianism has been increasingly prominent, and is carried out often by external groups. A notable case is the ‘northern’ branch of the Islamic Movement in Israel Proper, which has planned an effective mobilization and expansion campaign around the slogan ‘al-Aqsa fee dhatar’ (‘al-Aqsa in danger’), and has been coordinating renovations and redevelopment of the Temple Mount site for the last decade. The group, led by controversial Sheikh Raed Salah of Um al-Faham, uses its Israeli mobility rights to attend al-Aqsa Friday prayers, which are often closed to West Bank Arabs, en masse. The group also actively and openly mobilizes for the Arabization of Old Jerusalem. The two groups exemplify the inseparable
connection between cities such as Jerusalem and overlapping fields of power and identity, which propel the forces of religious radicalism in the city.

In parallel, Hamas has risen rapidly to political dominance, winning 47 per cent and four of six Jerusalem seats in the 2006 elections, and using the existence of the holy sites to mobilize large groups of Muslims to special events and regular pilgrimages. This is not entirely new in Palestinian politics, which during the 1920s and 1930s were dominated by Jerusalemite elites who often mobilized support through the use of religious institutions. Hamas often builds on the early connection of Palestinian nationalism to Islam, by scorning the failure of secularist mobilization to secure a state, and by emphasizing a 'return to the roots'. Here, glorification and control of the holy city and its sacred sites provide a route to national and personal salvation, embodied in the popular slogan 'Islamic is the solution'.

**Beer Sheva**

Beer Sheva (Be’er Sheva’ and Bi’r Saba’a in Hebrew and Arabic, respectively) is mentioned in the Bible as Abraham’s first place of residence in the Promised Land. It is believed the city was abandoned in the seventh century CE, and was rebuilt only at the beginning of the twentieth century by the Ottomans. The 1947 UN partition plan included Beer Sheva under Palestinian sovereignty, but the city was captured by Israel in 1948 and since has remained within its sovereign territory. During the 1948 war, some 80 per cent of Arabs of the Naqab region (Negev) were driven out, mainly into Gaza, Egypt, the West Bank, and Jordan, leaving only 11,000 concentrated in a special military-controlled zone known as ‘the Siyyag’ (‘the Fence’). This group was eventually awarded Israeli citizenship (figure 8.5).

In the ensuing decades, Israel has invested a great deal of effort Judaizing the previously Arab Naqab (Negev) region through a combination of deeply ethnocratic land, development, housing, and planning policies. Israel appropriated nearly all Bedouin land (with about 5 per cent of the region still under dispute) and built ten new Jewish towns and about one hundred rural Jewish settlements. Here, Jewish immigrants were housed, wrapped in a glorifying national and planning discourse about ‘settling the frontier’.

In the 1970s Israel began to implement an urbanizing planning strategy for the region’s Bedouin Arabs, attempting to concentrate them in seven modern towns immediately surrounding, but not included in, the Jewish Beer Sheva. This policy relocated about half the Arabs of the south (some 85,000 in 2007 – mainly those with no land claims) though the (significant) lure of modern infrastructure. However, despite some development, the towns have become known for their marginality, unemployment, deprivation, and crime (Abu-Saad and Lithwick, 2004).

The other 80–85,000 Bedouins have remained on their claimed land, in some forty-five shanty towns and villages (figure 8.5). A bitter land conflict has developed, with the state denying their indigenous land rights, and as a result declaring them ‘invaders’ in their own historic localities. In an effort to force them to relocate, the state has prevented the supply of most services, including roads, electricity, clinics, and planning, and has regularly

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**Figure 8.5.** Jewish and Bedouin settlement in the Beer Sheva region.
launched house-demolition campaigns (Yiftachel, 2004). Levels of poverty, mortality, and crime are among the highest in Israel/Palestine, and create a metropolitan geography of stark ethno-class contrast with the neighbouring, well-serviced, Jewish localities.

The Beer Sheva metropolis has therefore come to resemble many Third World cities, with a well-developed modern urban core and a range of peripheral informal localities which suffer from severe poverty and deprivation. This is reflected in the nature of religious politics. Unlike Hebron and Jerusalem, Jewish (internal) colonial policies in the Beer Sheva region have only rarely been couched in religious terms, despite the biblical significance of the place. Instead, they have used discourses of modernization, national (Jewish) territorial control, ‘proper planning’, and ‘law and order’.

The Bedouin Arab challenge to Jewish hegemony is represented through repeated moral panics over demographic and territorial dominance, and over crime and ‘primitivism’ – but very rarely over religious issues.

Politically, the composition of the Beer Sheva City Council, too, has remained quite stable, with religious party representation hovering around 20–25 per cent for the last two decades (25 per cent in the last municipal elections). The relatively low profile of religiosity also reflects the conspicuous absence of Russian-speaking immigrants in the city, who now outnumber all other Jewish groups and are known for their secularism. City politics have been dominated for years by the centrist and nationalist Labor, Likud, and (recently) Kadima parties. The last two local elections were won by a Labor-affiliated mayor, while Likud remains the largest party in national elections. Religious parties occupy five of the 25 city council seats, but they rarely raise biblical-related issues or pursue radical religious demands.

Recently, however, religion has become more prominent. In a similar fashion to cities of the global South – being a region where sovereignty itself is not contested – these religious politics have mainly emerged ‘from below’ as a ‘weapon of the weak’ (Scott, 1985). The Islamic movement, for example, has effectively mobilized Bedouins, whose religious practices were traditionally quite removed from formal Islam, through effective social aid and educational campaigns, and since the 1980s the landscape has become dotted with mosques. Naqab Islamic organizations are affiliated with the more moderate ‘southern’ branch, and have rapidly increased their political support, currently holding the mayoral position in five of the seven Arab towns. In the 2006 national elections they won the support of 55 per cent of Naqab Arabs (running jointly with a traditional Arab United List). Among the Jews, too, the main expression of religious politics has been ‘from below’, though the emergence of the Shas movement, representing the lower-income Oriental Jewish classes, and holding four council seats. Shas has been more concerned with material services and education facilities than with linking religiosity to urban colonialism.

It should also be mentioned that inter-communal violence, so visible in Hebron and Jerusalem, has been rare in Beer Sheva. Only four people are estimated to have died on ‘national grounds’ during the last two decades, compared to hundreds in the other two cities (B’tselem, 2007). Continuous urban colonialism, however, is apparent in the Beer Sheva region, and while it is less confrontational than in Hebron and Jerusalem, it generates its own politics. Religion has also played an increasing part in recent Arab campaigns in the city, especially around education and places of worship. The latest such issue surrounds the renowned and architecturally significant Beer Sheva mosque, built by the Ottomans to serve the region’s population. Despite constant appeals, the city has refused to open it for prayer, and a powerful councillor of the ruling coalition, Eli Bakker (2005), has claimed, ‘the region has dozens of mosques in Bedouin localities and towns, and Beer Sheva is now a Jewish city, with the right to protect this urban character’.

As a result, the mosque has been lying idle for decades, and is now in an advanced state of architectural deterioration. In a recent appeal, the Israeli high court ruled in favour of opening the mosque for ‘Arab cultural uses’ (Adalah, 2005). Yet, despite the ruling, the city is steadfast in its refusal, and has now condemned the building as too dangerous for human use. While the most vocal against opening the mosque have been members of the nationalist Likud and (the mainly Russian) Yisrael Beitenu parties, Jewish religious parties have also joined the choir. Yaakov Margi, a Beer Sheva Shas leader, has claimed,

… if implemented, this high court decision could be the last nail in the Beer Sheva coffin . . . we have been increasingly surrounded by Bedouins from all sides, and now they attempt to penetrate the heart of our city by opening their mosque . . . Let us never forget – Beer Sheva was the first Jewish city; this is where Abraham’s wells are still in existence after 4,000 years. We should continue and drink the wisdom of our Torah like the water from these wells, and remember that one of these wisdoms is to never, but never, let the Amalek [hostile nations] raise their heads! (Sheva [newspaper], 12 April 2006)

Margi’s statement is a reminder that in spatial conflicts typical of urban colonialism and contested identity politics, religion is rarely far from the
surface. But the process of polarization and radicalism, which has led to massive mobilization and widespread violence in other regions, has so far remained quite dormant in Beer Sheva. Thus, in this city religious politics have begun to make their mark, but have not yet become radicalized.

Instead of Conclusions

Students of religious politics are urged to incorporate the political geography of urban colonialism into their work and understanding. As shown here, the hegemonic systems of control – ethno-nationalism, globalizing capitalism, and increasingly politicized religion – intersect through the ‘thick matter’ of making and changing cities. It is there that new forms of appropriating and racializing colonialisms are being produced as the foundation for religious radicalism, both ‘from above and ‘below’.

But rather than rely on these macro-processes as ‘given’, scholars are urged to ‘breathe life’ into the details of urban spaces and configurations of power, rights, and identities which emerge in different types of sacred or sanctified spaces, and which give rise to different forms of domination and counter-mobilization. These, we suggest, provide insightful clues to the rise and nature of religious radicalism, as also depicted in the wise words of the late Hebrew poet Yeḥuda Amichai:

Gods Change. Prayers Remain Forever

... We are all Abraham’s children
But also the grandchildren of Terach, Abraham’s father.
And it’s now perhaps time for the grandchildren to do
To their father what he did to his,
Break his statutes and idols, his religion and faith,
But this too will be the beginning of a new religion.

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