

Stepping Back on Israel-Palestine

By Colonel Daniel Smith, USA (Ret.) | April 19, 2004

"Men never do evil so fully and so happily as when they do it for conscience's sake."

Blaise Pascal, Pensees (1660)

Context I: The Israeli Strike and the U.S. Reaction

The March 22 early morning Israeli Apache helicopter missile attack was as deadly as it was unexpected. Sheik Ahmed Yassin, founder and leader of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas), and seven others were killed in the heart of Gaza City. As word spread of the assassination, Israel put the remaining Hamas leadership on notice that they were also targets regardless of how quiescent they might be in the days and weeks ahead.

Washington's reaction was predictably muted. At his press briefing later the same day, White House spokesperson Scott McClellan reaffirmed "that Israel has a right to defend herself, but all parties, including Israel, need to keep in mind the consequences of their actions."

Over at the State Department, spokesperson Richard Boucher was marginally more neutral: "[T]here is no doubt of Israel's right to self-defense against the brutal use of terror by Hamas and other organizations. At the same time, we're deeply troubled by this morning's events in Gaza.... We think all the sides need to remain focused on measures to bring to an end the terror and violence and to avoid actions that escalate tension and harm the efforts to achieve peace... [I]n particular, the Palestinian Authority must do everything in its power to confront and halt the terror and violence."

Context II: Strike Equals Counterstrike

The proximate cause behind the Israeli strike was the March 15 twin suicide bombings in the industrial port of Ashdod. The bombers, who reportedly came from Gaza City, killed ten Israelis and wounded 18. (Hundreds might have died had the bombers gotten

closer to large holding tanks containing toxic chemicals.) Hamas and Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, both on the State Department's list of terrorist organizations, claimed responsibility for the counterstrike, citing as their justification the March 7 Israeli raid into Gaza in which 14 Palestinians died and 81 were injured.

That said, many will simply turn their attention to other matters in the expectation that the tit-for-tat past patterns will recycle. Nations expressed great empathy for the innocent noncombatants who died in the multiple terror bombings in Madrid, sending high-level dignitaries to the March 24 memorial services for the victims. There are no similar official displays of empathy for noncombatant Israeli and Palestinian dead despite the fact that each of them possessed the Light within as surely as each slain Spaniard did—and as every person does.

History as Terror

Invariably, when an individual, a group, a nation forgets this simple truth, the road to extremes of violent conflict opens or re-opens. In the modern-day struggle between Israelis and Arabs, this principle was lost long ago. In its place, on both sides, is an almost Stone Age instinct, an indiscriminate "thirst for revenge" implemented by fiercely determined ideologues whose actions garner popular support as reflected in opinion polls and street demonstrations. Their ferocity and the mounting death tolls have all but silenced reasoned discourse and mooted all distinctions between fighters and noncombatants. In turn, this "terror of thought" has infiltrated the social fabric of both Israelis and Palestinians, producing a highly ideological (and hence a significantly altered) history based on a xenophobic exceptionalism whose



slightest diminution signals the beginning of the “end of civilization.”

The weakness of ideological “history” is its inability to withstand the scrutiny of reason.¹ (For example, was Yassin a compassionate leader always seeking for accord with Israelis—the Palestinian view—or the instigator of many terrorist actions—the Israeli view—or both?) But a people on the front lines of war tend to be concerned with either defending themselves or avoiding the violence altogether. The fearful risks in simply staying alive effectively muzzle reason and allow current events—and rumors of events—to be piled upon already grotesquely distorted records and recollections of places where tribes and peoples fought, winning glorious victories or suffering ignominious catastrophes. Either way, these often “literary” accounts portray what today would be labeled crimes against humanity and genocide as virtually routine in the past when war was considered to involve everyone in the contested area.

Indeed, many records and accounts of warfare celebrate the total annihilation of “enemies” as manifestations not only of military prowess but divine guidance. This latter added a “universalist” dimension that lay beyond human reason, human control, and hence human accountability. In one sense, military history is a record of the gradual (if occasionally regressive) acceptance of distinctions among people found on or near battlefields; the protections, safeguards, and liabilities afforded or imposed on them; and the accountability of individuals who violate the rules.

The problem for the Israelis and Palestinians is twofold: not only are they not observing the same set of rules, they have ideological paradigms that are each internally consistent but are dysfunctional with each

other. This should not be too surprising given the hurdles that confronted others who labored to “humanize” armed conflict.

The Broad Struggle to Redeem Humanity and History

The vague concept of “the nation at war” persisted unchallenged until the 17th and 18th centuries.

These centuries saw the first systemic efforts to codify distinctions between combatants and noncombatants that had developed informally in what is still called “just war” theory.² As it turned out, this was a fortuitous development, for to fend off other European countries opposed to its post-revolutionary societal changes, France adopted the levee en masse in the 1790s. In so doing, the new republic arguably became a “whole nation at war,” a status that, in theory, again blurred many of the emerging distinctions between combatant and non-combatant. It was not until the late 19th and the first half

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of the 20th centuries that nations endorsed rules—the Hague Regulations (1907) and the Geneva Conventions (1949 and the 1977 Protocols)—specifically designed to separate and protect noncombatants and civilian artifacts and institutions from military assault.

Yet even as some worked to formulate restrictions on war, others ignored the evolving consensus that tried to rein in the attitude that in war, “anything goes.” In Nanking, China in 1937, Imperial Japanese troops massacred 300,000-340,000 civilians. In Nazi Germany and in countries occupied by Hitler’s armies, millions of Jews, Romas, and other “undesirables” were slaughtered. World War II saw wholesale attacks on cities and populations, including the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by atomic bombs.³

World war was total and indiscriminate war; it was the levee en masse on a grand scale.

It was also the first war after which political and military leaders—and lower-ranking soldiers who were often guards at civilian prison death camps—were brought before special judicial courts as criminals.

ReNEWed History, Old Paradigm

Into this poisonous atmosphere the new state of Israel emerged. It saw past political failure and loss of statehood as conditions it would not repeat. This determination was tested immediately when its Arab neighbors attacked in an effort to prevent Israel's very establishment even before the state came into existence on May 14, 1948. Despite its lack of strategic depth (that is, its small size), Israel prevailed in this and subsequent wars by mobilizing the nation's resources, military and civilian, just as World War II

belligerents—Allies and Axis powers alike—had done. (In fact, in the 1948 War for Independence (Israel) or al Nakba (“Catastrophe”) (Arab), Israeli forces always outnumbered their Arab foes, who also were not united on their war aims.)

When the dust settled after the 1967 Six Day War, Israel found itself in control of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank with their large, non-Israeli, exhausted, hostile populations. Occupation on this scale was new, but it was implemented, metaphorically, as in ancient times when a defeated population had been decimated. As months grew into years and years into decades, Israel, in violation of international law, annexed Arab East Jerusalem and an adjacent area as well as the militarily important Golan Heights. Throughout the occupied areas, Israeli outposts and settlements spread and became solidly entrenched despite Palestinian protests and outside opposition. As the Palestinians organized and increased their

Israelis	Palestinians
- Jewish holy places must be under exclusive Israeli control even if they are also holy to Muslims and Christians;	- Muslim holy places must be under exclusive Arab control even if they are also holy to Jews and Christians;
- substantial further Jewish immigration to Israel justifies occupying additional territory;	- Israel is illegitimate and must be destroyed;
- Israel's superior political, technological, and commercial competence gives them innate superiority and preponderant rights over the inferior Arabs;	- sophisticated arms will bring military victory even though many potential fighters are technically untrained;
- Israel is not responsible for Arabs who chose to flee Israeli territory and whose lands were taken over by Israel or Israeli citizens;	- Palestinians who fled or were forced to flee Israel and their descendants have the right of return and of reclaiming their lands and property;
- “strategic” boundaries and military strength provide more permanent security than an agreed settlement and international guarantees;	- after losing three wars, Arab dignity can be recovered only by more fighting and final military victory;
- massive retaliation against Arab settlements for terrorist raids into Israel will dissuade more raids and promote Israeli security.	- until the right of return is accepted, acts of terror against innocent Israelis are justified as they will sap Israeli resolve and strengthen the Arab cause.

attacks from external bases in Jordan and then Lebanon, the concomitant need to protect settlers from attacks brought more and more harsh restrictions on noncombatant Palestinians and a larger presence of Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). Inevitably, in such a super-charged atmosphere, both sides conflated combatants with noncombatants. Once more, it was two nations at war; the only distinctions that mattered were Israeli/not Israeli and Palestinian/not Palestinian.

And there are the paradigms. Many Israelis, supported by the U.S. and confident they would always prevail, believed the people of Israel finally had taken permanent control of their patrimony. Many Palestinians, dispossessed of home and nation, bereft of effective support from Arab or non-Arab countries, with many forced into squalid refugee camps, turned to simply enduring and surviving. Such a bleak present of unknown duration was the perfect incubator for hate so intense that the prospect of certain death while attacking the “enemy”—defined as the whole people of Israel—was of no consequence for the “martyrs.”

Clashing Myths

By 1969, the face of occupation had re-solidified two decades of modern grievances and created new reasons for enmity. In January 1969, Charles Yost, U.S. Ambassador to the UN, writing in the *Atlantic Monthly*, described what he saw as the then prevailing myths driving the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation and fueling the increasing disregard for the status and rights of noncombatants. Set side by side (and slightly re-arranged), they are virtual mirrors—still as powerful and as unyielding for many today as they were in 1969.

Israeli policy then and now is premised on the flawed belief that it is possible to achieve unilateral security through the broad application of military power, harsh occupation measures against the entire population, and swift retribution for any armed attack on its soldiers or civilians. Two other components that are essential parts of the Israeli approach are the use of targeted assassinations and collective guilt of the family or village of any Palestinian who attacks any Israeli. In its retribution, in its targeted assassinations, in its application of collective guilt and guilt by association, Israel claims to exercise great care to avoid killing and injuring noncombatants. But Israel, like the U.S., always “regrets” the ever-present, unfortunate, but inevitable “collateral damage” because strikes and counterstrikes must be directed into villages and refugee camps that harbor “terrorists.”

Militants among Palestinians, too, have followed a parallel path of indiscriminate violence that is as repugnant to the The Hague and Geneva documents as is Israel’s reliance on force and deprivation in Gaza and the West Bank. Each side sees the other as odious; each demands that the other take the first step—the Palestinian Authority must stop the militants from attacking Israelis while the Israelis must stop their destructive and lethal incursions into Palestinian areas to exact revenge. Neither side under its current leaders seems able to develop the necessary trust to re-establish the fundamentally cooperative relationships through which acts of terror and retributive terror can be disrupted and ultimately precluded.

Why? Because at the center of each failed attempt to establish a lasting, cooperative relationship is the undeniable fact of an asymmetry of coercive power between Israel and the Palestinian Authority and within the Palestinian community itself. This in turn creates unrealizable Israeli demands (“stop the vio-

lence first, then we will talk”) on Palestinian leaders whose “failure” induces Israeli strikes, which lead to counterstrikes by autonomous Palestinian factions, which continues the downward spiral and extends it to every person on both sides. The end result is that neither side can achieve its goals because control of events defaults to extremists. Moreover, Ariel Sharon’s “new plan” to remove Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip but keep six large settlements on the West Bank, which President Bush endorsed on April 14, predictably will only reinforce this tendency.

The Nation as Target: The Influence of Asymmetrical Power

The assassination of Sheik Yassin has propelled the more militant Dr. Abdel Aziz Rantisi into the front leadership ranks of Hamas. Rantisi, who advocates a Palestinian state that would include all of present-day Israel, has declared that “The Israelis, those occupying our land, are targets.” (Another ranking Hamas leader specifically named Sharon as a target, presumably retaliating for Israel’s declaration about the Hamas leadership.) However, Rantisi also made a distinction between the U.S. government and its policies, which he opposes, and the “American population,” whom he said is not a target of Hamas.

Others are equally “discriminating” depending on who is being discussed. Two days after September 11, 2001, the University of Qatar’s dean of Islamic studies, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, expressed his condolences to the survivors and the relatives of those killed, observing that “Islam, the religion of tolerance, holds the human soul in high esteem, and considers the attack against innocent human beings a grave sin.” A year later, in a July 2002 press conference in Stockholm, he took a much different tone toward Israelis:

“The martyrdom operations carried out by the Palestinian factions to resist the Zionist occupa-

tion are not in any way included in the framework of prohibited terrorism, even if the victims include some civilians.... Every Israeli is a soldier in the army, either in practical terms or because he is a reservist soldier who can be summoned at any time for war.... In modern war, all of society, with all its classes and ethnic groups, is mobilized to participate in the war, to aid its continuation, and to provide it with the material and human fuel required for it to assure the victory of the state fighting its enemies. Every citizen in society must take upon himself a role in the effort to provide for the battle. The entire domestic front, including professionals, laborers, and industrialists, stands behind the fighting army, even if it does not bear arms.”

What this reflects is the dehumanization of relationships by aggregation. The

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Israeli occupation is aimed not just at individual Palestinians but at the structures that undergird the community and give it life—witness the destruction of hospitals and schools and the spate of missile attacks against Palestinian police stations and against Yasser Arafat’s compound in Ramallah. From the Palestinian perspective, this violence against the “nation” justifies reciprocal violence wherever it can be done. The

asymmetry in the available means for successful violence, which drives the suicide bombings, thus fits within the Palestinian paradigm.

Ancient grievances reinforced by current events have driven influential elites on both sides—unabashedly led by Sharon and Rantisi among others—back to a primitive interpretation of the use of violence as a responsibility of states not only against enemy soldiers but against entire societies, either to repress or to annihilate them. Pragmatically, over the long term, such a policy so saps the physical resources of the state that it becomes counterproductive in the extreme. More importantly, as Vietnam suggested,

those who rest the entire future on military successes are destined to suffer political and moral defeat—and risk the loss of their nation’s soul.

Restoring Constraint

The wall of hatred and fear that again exists between Israelis (60% approved of Yassin’s assassination) and Palestinians guarantees continuance of the downward spiral of death. What is needed is the development, even if from sheer exhaustion, of a balanced, independent peace process that can scale, rung by rung, the wall of hatred through rebuilding trust in the declared objective of two states existing side by side. Simplistic slogans and superficial involvement by the U.S. and other interested third parties ignores the indispensable need to understand the complex human motivations that impel the resort to terror in the first instance.

Lacking this understanding, governments are unable to craft effective and discrete responses to the continual, low-level warfare or to fashion directed policies that actually might prove to be remedies for the causes of terror.

In the Middle East context, such depth and breadth of understanding held the potential to provide space for the Israelis and Palestinians to step back and then re-engage at the fundamental level—the mutual, simultaneous end to violence. After April 14, this first step may be delayed indefinitely, along with the other key components that allow for building the edifice of peace: mutual threat reduction, confidence building, security measures, and nation building.

Conflict resolution will not occur until political and factional leaders re-absorb the lesson that each person’s humanity, while unique, is of equal value. Only when this truth becomes thoroughly engrained in thought and policy will it be possible to undertake the sustained campaign to constrain the unbridled violence that ravages this part of the world and to give both Israelis and Palestinians more to live for than to die for.

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END NOTES

- ¹ John Ralston Saul notes: "Ideology, like theater, is dependent on the willing suspension of disbelief. At the core of every ideology lies the worship of a bright new future, with only failure in the immediate past. But once the suspension goes, willingness converts into suspicion—the suspicion of the betrayed. Our brilliant leaders abruptly appear naive, even ridiculous. See "The Collapse of Globalism and the rebirth of nationalism" in *Harper's Magazine*, March 2004 (p. 41).
- ² In the 17th century, Dutch diplomat Hugo Grotius listed the "just causes" for war and the allowable means for conducting war "justly." Among these was the prohibition on deliberately attacking noncombatants. In the 18th century, the French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau (*The Social Contract*, 1762) and Swiss legal philosopher Emmerich de Vattel (*The Law of Nations*, 1758) developed the distinctions between what was allowed and prohibited in war. De Vattel, for example, wrote: "Women, children, feeble old men, and sick persons, come under the description of enemies.... But these are enemies who make no resistance; and consequently we have no right to maltreat their persons or use any violence against them, much less to take away their lives. This is so plain a maxim of justice and humanity, that at present every nation in the least degree civilized, acquiesces in it." (Book III, para. 145)
- ³ The intent of allied bombing of cities in Germany and Japan was to break the bond between the regimes and civilian willpower. Some 80,000-100,000 Japanese were killed in the March 1945 bombing that destroyed 16 square miles of Tokyo, leaving a million without shelter. In total, including effects from the two atomic bombs, 178 square miles of Japan were destroyed and 8.5 million people were left homeless. See Donald Chisholm's "The Risk of Optimism in the Conduct of War" in *Parameters*, U.S. Army War College, Winter 2003-2004, pp. 114-131.

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