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A note on the repression of dialogue in Israel/Palestine

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As a therapist who works as a political consultant, I am interested in understanding some of the psychological reasons why it has been so terribly hard over many decades to achieve meaningful dialogue between the warring parties in the Middle East – and also within world Jewry. Governments have tried, and organizations and people of good faith have tried. There are certainly massive political, economic and historical reasons for what has been, in overall terms, a failure. My modest question: Are there some psychological ingredients we could add to these efforts?

My experiences running dialogue groups bringing together Israelis, Arabs and Palestinians in several countries, including Israel, have taught me the incredible degree to which Palestinians and Israelis remain genuinely fascinated with each other. War actually intensifies the sense of being bound together, which is what the word 'fascination' means. But does emotional interdependence rest only upon their historic enmity? Or is there a deeper yet repressed desire to know one another? According to the Qur'anic principle of *Ta'aruf*, political conflict has a crucial function of enabling different groups to get to know one another. Unfortunately, it is not in the interests of embattled leaderships in the region to foster much mutual understanding. This would undercut their reason for existing. So attempts at dialogue tend to go on more actively elsewhere in the world, though even there the impulse to know the other has to be repressed and got rid of.

What could be done to provide arenas (small and large) where, alongside vigorous and even hostile political debate, tiny shards of mutual knowledge might come into being? Jungian psychoanalysts speak of their work as taking place within an alchemical vessel. Unpromising ingredients are mixed together in such a way that something more valuable and beautiful can emerge from out of the pot.

The profound cultural inequality in the Middle East makes the provision of such arenas problematic. We saw how cultural and other inequalities conditioned the debate over an academic and cultural boycott. During the debate, it became clear how little academic freedom existed for Palestinians and therefore how fatuous calls for even-handedness were. This profound inequality also colours the military issues.

However, the problem of a lack of places in which to talk is not the only obstacle to dialogue. When such debates do take place, we see a kind of political moralism in action. This means that each side attacks the other side via moral condemnation of its extremists, whether those extremists are represented in the debate or not. So the arguments leapfrog anyone who might be interested in dialogue to focus on either suicide bombers or machine-gun-toting settlers. For the majority, the ease with

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which they can validly condemn these fanatics means that the psychologically difficult task of dialogue can be avoided.

I have noted, in such arenas, that once the entry of moralism is pointed out by someone, there is a somewhat greater possibility of some kind of contained yet passionate interaction to take place. Not all Israelis live in or support the settlements; not all Palestinians want to see suicide bombings and rocket attacks. People occupying the political middle ground are shamed and embarrassed into silence when their more extreme compatriots are brought into the debate.

But noting the errant moralism of much of Middle Eastern political discourse does not bring to an end this catalogue of the reasons why dialogue does not take place. My experiences in those groups suggest that peacemakers pay too much attention to the manifest content of political positions in the Middle East and not enough to the way in which those positions are expressed, to what I call their 'political style'. If we consider the political style of those active in this dispute, then we can see that on both sides there are (literal and metaphorical) terrorists, warriors, historians, diplomats, philosophers, poets, aggressors, victims – and even ostriches. Take these tags metaphorically, and spread them out on a piece of paper and pair them up, and a rather different map of the argument appears. Terrorists from one side go with terrorists from the other, philosophers with philosophers, and so on. Not because they agree, for they obviously do not. But they tend to speak in a similar language and hence start from a higher threshold of mutual comprehension. Anyone – president or psychotherapist – trying to create a vessel in which peacemaking dialogue can flourish might recall that it ain't *only* what you do … .

Peacemakers need to think about psychological reasons for their failure to establish dialogue in the Middle East. These include the repression by self-seeking leaderships of the desire to know the other side, the corruption of passionate expression of difference by cheap moralism leading to superior–inferior thinking, and a concentration on the content of what is said which, though important on one level, misses the point about how similarities in political style might make dialogue easier.

Notes on contributor

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