



Lessons from the Israel-Hamas War

“Gaza divides the wheat from the chaff among religious leaders”

~ Dr. James M. Dorsey, *Times of Israel*

“The illusion that fundamentalism and terrorism can be overcome with Western tools has been completely shattered. In light of the left’s intellectual hypocrisy and the right’s lust for war, it may be time for a new approach.”

~ Dr. Amit Varshizky, *Haaretz*

TEL AVIV, Israel, 24 November 2023 — Two essays that were recently published in leading Israeli newspapers highlight religion’s critical role in shaping geopolitical dynamics. The articles contrast the humane and constructive engagement of Indonesia’s Nahdlatul Ulama in this vital arena with the harsh and polarizing rhetoric generally employed on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian divide.

In an in-depth analytical piece titled “Israel–Hamas War: What if there’s another way to fight fundamentalism?” author and historian Dr. Amit Varshizky writes:

Only a Muslim struggle which calls, for example, for what’s known as *ijtihad* (renewal of religious rulings in the direction of openness and social reform), or the adoption of a moderate, tolerant form of Islam such as was introduced by Abdurrahman Wahid, the fourth president of Indonesia and onetime chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama, the world’s largest Sunni religious-political movement, will be able to accelerate liberalization processes in Muslim society and mitigate entrenched resentments that originate in the disparity between a feeling of religious supremacy and political weakness. Voices like this, it must be acknowledged with regret, are very much absent in the Muslim Middle East today.

Dr. Varshizky’s essay, published in Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, argues that:

Cultural blindness is not only the preserve of the non-liberal, progressive left. The moderate left and the liberal (or neoliberal) center also believe that through capitalism, they can impose democratic values on nondemocratic cultures and bring their gospel of liberalism to every corner of the world. This logic has guided the foreign policy of the United States since the end of the Cold War, and has frequently served as cause for armed intervention in the affairs of other countries. Here too the implicit assumption is that changing the material reality by means of economic incentives will lead the local culture to shed its traditional values, and gradually adopt the democratic and liberal values of the West. How did New York Times columnist Thomas L. Friedman put it?: “No two countries that both have a McDonald’s have ever fought a war against each other.”

The failure of the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan is only a litmus test for the naivete and arrogance of American globalism. The same neoliberal approach, which reduces human beings to the sum total of their utilitarian material needs, also underlies the failed concept held by the Netanyahu government vis-à-vis the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip: If we just give them enough money, build them a port, allow workers to enter Israel, they will forgo their jihadist dreams; if they just have something to lose, they will abandon the armed struggle. We know the result.

Thus, while the ultra-nationalist, anti-Islamist right, internationally and in Israel, celebrates the blood-drenched events as the fulfillment of the apocalyptic vision of the clash of civilizations, people who persist in clinging to the values of freedom and humanism remain discomfited and confused. In light of the dogmatism and intellectual hypocrisy of the left, the conceptual meagerness of the center and the craving for war of the right – must we abandon the aspiration for regional and world peace and for universal solidarity? Not necessarily. Today, though, we must air out the stifled temples of thought and shake off old conceptions. What's needed, then, is a new paradigm.

A third way....

The unavoidable conclusion is that the road to human solidarity and world peace does not pass through the blurring of cultural boundaries or through forcing the values of the secular West on non-Western and non-secular cultures....

The assumption that prevailed in the West until recently, to the effect that the processes of modernization would bring about extensive secularization and a decline in the status of religion in the world, has long since been refuted. The process by which religion has returned to being a world player, termed “resacralization” by scholars, points to the universal psychological need that religious faith plays in human life and indicates that religious frameworks, in various forms, will be part of human society for a long time to come. Ignoring this basic truth is one of the central weaknesses of the liberal West in reading the political map, in Israel and elsewhere.

When we hear a Hamas fighter boast to his father and mother over the phone about having murdered 10 Jews, we must perforce ask ourselves, notwithstanding the gross breach of all the rules of political correctness, what sort of culture is capable of producing a lust for killing and cruelty on this scale. Are fundamentalism and terrorism the legitimate offspring of Islam, or are they its stepchildren? Are they the product of political backwardness and of economic and social distress, of siege and occupation – or is there also a cultural element at work that creates fertile ground for the emergence of a radical, murderous worldview?

Ignoring the religious and cultural motive leads us once more to Western blindness and arrogance, in which the West's standards are projected onto non-Western cultures. A deficient reading of the cultural reality leads to a deficient policy, which takes the form of an attempt to cope with what to us are irrational motivations via rational tools, and to supply spiritual and mental needs through material means and an economic payoff. Such an attempt is doomed to failure.

Recognition of the cultural-moral fault line gives rise to two possible horizons of action. The first holds that the clash of civilizations between the West and radical Islam (or the Chinese-Russian-Iranian axis, as others argue) is an unavoidable fact and perhaps even a desirable one. You want a liberal, free, democratic world? Be prepared to fight for it, be prepared to make sacrifices and even to exact a price from innocent noncombatants, just as the Allied powers did in World War II. It's them or us. The road to world peace runs through world war. The second channel of activity, which characterizes the progressive left, is to see cultural relativism also as moral relativism and automatically, in the name of decolonialization, to take the side of the weak (the Palestinians) against the strong (the West, Israel), on the assumption that the dismantling of Western power structures will necessarily usher in an area of equality, justice and world peace.

But is there another way, a third way, that does not see war as an ultimate solution but also does not slide into moralistic naivete and blinding self-righteousness? In a polarized political environment, is there still a way to fuse realism with idealism, to pursue the need to fight for the values of life and freedom without betraying them in the course of fighting? How do we wage such a war without corrupting ourselves, without becoming addicted to solutions of force, without yielding to the temptations of hatred, cynicism, racism and nationalism?

Those are the great dilemmas of our time, and they become sharper in light of the war now raging in Gaza. It's a mistake to think that the use of military force can bring about the absolute annihilation of Hamas, just as it's a mistake to think that avoiding the use of force will advance dialogue with an enemy whose worldview is utterly different from ours, who sees moderation as a sign of weakness and national flaccidity. Yet at the same time, force is always a means and not an end. Even the liquidation of the entire political and military leadership of Hamas, and the cleansing of Gaza of its critical infrastructure, command posts and terrorist nests will not completely eradicate the organization. Nor will that be accomplished by demilitarizing Gaza, dividing it and placing it under an international force of observers or in the hands of the Palestinian Authority.

Because Hamas, like all forms of religious radicalism, is an ideal – “Hamas is in the heart,” its followers say – and until a response is provided for the emotional, psychological and spiritual needs that religious radicalism in all its forms supplies, we will not be able to cope with the problem of Hamas-style fundamentalism specifically, and with Muslim fundamentalism in general. However, action of that kind can only come from within the Muslim world, not via coercion from the outside. Only those who are familiar with the theological sources of fundamentalist Islam, who speak its cultural language, will be able to propose a new religious narrative and offer spiritual balm to millions of young people who are susceptible to the allurements of radicalism.

Only a Muslim struggle which calls, for example, for what's known as *ijtihad* (renewal of religious rulings in the direction of openness and social reform), or the adoption of a moderate, tolerant form of Islam such as was introduced by Abdurrahman Wahid, the fourth president of Indonesia and onetime chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama, the world's largest Sunni religious-political movement, will be able to accelerate liberalization processes in Muslim society and mitigate entrenched resentments that originate in the disparity between a feeling of religious supremacy

and political weakness. Voices like this, it must be acknowledged with regret, are very much absent in the Muslim Middle East today.

In light of the collapse of the ideological left and the blindness of moderate liberalism globally, the unavoidable conclusion is that the road to human solidarity and world peace does not pass through the blurring of cultural boundaries or through forcing the values of the secular West on non-Western and non-secular cultures. Rather, it lies in adopting a principle of equality in diversity and in cultivating life-sanctifying values, values of openness and tolerance, which exist to some degree in every religion and in every culture, while emphasizing what's shared over what's different and articulating a unifying vision of a multihued humanity based on recognition of universal human nature.

For while cultural values are a relative matter, morality is absolute and universal. Of the truth, it is said that it is one but has many names. Cultures are frameworks of meaning, carriers of values, yet at the same time they are heterogeneous, diffuse, changing unceasingly, and precisely because of that are amenable to being shaped and influenced. Language, symbols, myths, narratives, traditions – all are inbuilt elements in the culture, yet are always amenable to interpretation and renewal. Man is a creature of his culture but simultaneously creates it.

That mission will require not only statesmen of vision, along with economic and social entrepreneurs, but also clerics and spiritual leaders, intellectuals and educators. Only profound cultural metamorphoses will make it possible to establish at some point in the future a new world order that will be able to cope with the global challenges of the 21st century without ignoring the basic human need for community and cultural affiliation.

Is this achievable? It's hard to say, but this is the vision that should guide the realistic lovers of peace and believers in humanity. It's a Sisyphean, multiyear task, but it is the only alternative to war, destruction and bloodshed, all of which will only intensify in light of the continuing development of the technologies of war and tools of annihilation.

These insights are critical for Israel, which on the day after the war will be compelled not only to reformulate its state vision in regard to the termination of the conflict with the Palestinians, but to arrive at a decision in the culture war that is tearing it apart internally. Israel will be required to decide whether it wants to be part of the West or to continue its slide down the steep slope toward certain assimilation into the Middle Eastern space.

If Israel seeks life, it will need to rehabilitate its democratic and liberal moral infrastructure, and in the same breath to cleanse its own political and public spaces of the ultranationalist and fundamentalist blight that has spread within them, and to do so with the same determination with which it cleansed the terrorist nests in Gaza. Because the Hamas inside is no less dangerous than the Hamas outside.

In an article titled "[Gaza divides the wheat from the chaff among religious leaders](#)," geopolitical analyst Dr. James Dorsey wrote:

The contrast in responses to the Gaza war by Nahdlatul Ulama, the world's largest and most moderate, Indonesia-based Muslim civil society movement, and Al-Azhar, a Cairo-based, 1,053-year-old citadel of Islamic learning, spotlights the muddle.

In a statement calling for a "just" resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, [Nahdlatul Ulama urged](#) "that religious inspiration — including the values of universal love and compassion, human fraternity, and justice — be brought to the forefront of public awareness at all times, to help resolve conflict at every level of society, from the grassroots to the corridors of state power."

The statement called on Muslims "to collectively pray for the souls of all who have perished in the escalating (Israeli-Palestinian) violence."

It further advocated that "people and governments everywhere...refrain from weaponizing identity or appealing to religion to fuel hatred and hostility, including in relation to the conflict and violence between Israel and Palestine."

Following up on the statement, Nahdlatul Ulama has invited Muslim and non-Muslim religious authorities for a summit to discuss "religion's role in addressing Middle East violence and threats to a rules-based international order."

By contrast Al-Azhar, in its statement "proudly salut(ed) the efforts of the resistance of the proud Palestinian people." It offered "sincere condolences" to Palestinians "who were martyred in order to defend their homeland and nation" with no mention of innocent Israelis killed.

Al-Azhar's Global Fatwa Center issued a religious opinion echoing Hamas' assertion that [there are no innocent Israelis](#), a mirror image of Israeli statements that all Gazans are terrorists and supporters of Hamas.

"The term 'civilian' does not apply to the Zionist settlers on the occupied land. Rather, they are occupiers of the land who usurp rights, disregard the prophets' ways, and attack the holy sites in historic Jerusalem," the fatwa said.

It was unclear whether the fatwa was referring to settlers on Palestinian land conquered by Israel during the 1967 Middle East war or defined all Israeli Jews as settlers.

Endorsing the Hamas attack, various senior Al-Azhar clerics described Jews as "the cursed descendants of apes and pigs."....

The war constitutes a litmus test for Muslim and Jewish religious leaders on whether they can rise above the fray and adopt humanitarian and morally and ethically defensible positions.

So far, they have largely failed the test.

Among Muslims, the contrast between Al-Azhar and Nahdlatul Ulama's approach to the Gaza war is Exhibit A.

The contrast spotlights the essence of a battle for the soul of Islam that separates the wheat from the chaff in a competition between multiple players wanting to be seen as the beacon of Muslim moderation.