



## HUMAN SOLIDARITY AND INTERDEPENDENCE IN RESPONSE TO WARS: THE CASE OF JEWS AND MUSLIMS

On one level it's quite strange to be talking about human solidarity and interdependence as a response to war. Wars are the most intense expression of division, hatred, and violence among human beings, and in their wake, they often bring about the very opposite of solidarity and interdependence. And yet, we have instances in recent history that teach us that the opposite can also be true: war can actually bring people together. When people have allowed their hate to bring them to wholesale destruction and the deepest depths of suffering, they are sometimes motivated not only to stop the destruction, but to find ways to ensure that it will not happen again. Perhaps the best example is the creation of the United Nations which occurred in the aftermath of the worst war the world had seen.

I would like to explore the possibility that a similar process might happen between Jews and Muslims who have been at war with each other for several decades via the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. (I recognize that the conflict between Jews and Muslims is only one feature of this complex conflict, but it is certainly central to it.) Such an inquiry might appear absurd given the fact that the conflict is still very much in progress and that reconciliation between Jews and Muslims seems, at this point, to be a distant dream.

Perhaps conflicts have to end in massive destruction before people are shocked into the realization that everyone has more to lose than to gain by being at war. The United Nations, after all, was created only *after* the second world war ended, not while it was happening. We have not reached that point in the Middle East conflict. The war continues, and each side is still determined to win. Yet, even if peace between Jews and Muslims is far off, maybe we need to do a little dreaming once in a while. Sometimes great things begin with a dream, as we have seen in the work of great peacemakers such as Mohtama Ghandi and Martin Luther King whose “I Have a Dream” speech is much more realistic today in light of the recent election of Barack Obama than it was when it was delivered. And perhaps a reconciliation between Jews and Muslims is not as far off as one may think. My belief is that there is greater commonality between Jews and Muslims than they realize, and if we can define that commonality and bring it into the open, perhaps we can use it as a means to stop the conflict. Perhaps we don’t always have to witness massive destruction before we reconcile.

When I talk about commonality between Jews and Muslims, I’m thinking not of the religious issues that are most commonly discussed in interfaith dialogue between the two communities—such as similar religious beliefs and practices. I’m thinking of our respective historical experiences. These historical experiences have been critical in shaping the psychologies of Jews and Muslims and the way that each group thinks about the other. Moreover, there are remarkable similarities between the respective histories of the two peoples, though these similarities are not generally acknowledged, let alone discussed. Yet, if these similarities were part of our discourse, it could help bring about a more peaceful relationship between the two sides.

I will argue my case by recounting key elements in the two histories of the Jewish and Muslim communities and how they have impacted on their psychologies. My recounting of the two histories will be highly selective. I will highlight only those events that have shaped the way each group thinks about the other. My interest, after all, is not so much in pure history, but how history has shaped the psychological make-up of Jews and Muslims and brought them into conflict in the modern era. I will also be making generalizations about Jewish and Muslim perspectives in full recognition of the fact that the perspectives of these groups are not monolithic and are far more complex than those being presented here. I will be describing only “tendencies” in Jewish and Muslim thinking.

In order to understand the Jewish side of the conflict, we must understand the phenomenon of Zionism. As is well-known, Zionism has been vilified throughout the Arab and Muslim world since its inception, and yet, I have found in my own experience that many of the critics of Zionism make little attempt to understand it.

Zionism has to be analyzed against the background of the entirety of Jewish history which goes back three thousand years. For the first thousand years or so, Jews lived in the land of Israel, and that land was central to their identity both as a people and a religious community. In the Bible, God’s covenant with the Jewish people is predicated on the agreement that if they obey His laws, they will prosper in the land, and if they do not, they will be exiled.

Jews lost their sovereignty in the land relatively early in their history. They were dominated by a series of empires who ruled over them from the sixth century BCE onward, and they were finally exiled from their land in the first century CE by the

Romans. Throughout the Middle Ages and early modern period, Jews lived mostly under Christian and Muslim rule. There is consensus among historians that the Christians were far worse in their treatment of the Jews than the Muslims. In the worst instances, Jewish communities were subjected to physical violence, and hundreds of thousands of Jews died in such violence throughout the medieval period. In Muslim lands, Jews were treated much better. Jews were one of the “peoples of the book” (*ahl al-kitab*) and were therefore a protected minority along with Christians and several other groups. Instances of Muslim violence against Jews were uncommon. However, it is a common myth that Jews experienced no difficulties under Muslim rule. Jews in Muslim lands were consistently aware of their second-class status compared to Muslims, a perception reflected in medieval Jewish literature. Jews knew they would be treated well so long as they did not forget their inferior place in Muslim society. And there occasionally was violence against Jews in Muslim lands as well.

Jews regarded the exile from their land and their lowly condition among foreigners as punishment for their sins. They also believed that God would eventually send a messiah who would bring them back to their homeland to restore their sovereignty.

The situation of Jews in Christian Europe improved dramatically at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The Enlightenment inspired many European countries to establish democratic government and implement human rights, and as a result, Jews became citizens of European countries for the first time. These events elicited a wide range of reactions among Jews. Some Jews were so eager to become Europeans that they left Judaism and joined European society. Others insisted on continuing to live in separate communities, and they rejected European culture. However, most Jews

attempted to find a middle ground between these extremes. They attempted to hold on to their Jewish identity but recognized that Judaism would have to be rethought in light of the new situation.

By the end of the nineteenth century, there was yet another reaction to the relationship of the Jewish community to European society. In the 1880's, anti-Jewish hatred made a comeback throughout Europe. The worst example of this was in eastern Europe and Russia where, over the course of the next three decades, tens of thousands of Jews were killed in organized attacks against Jewish communities. In light of these events, many Jews experienced profound disillusionment. They had become convinced that the era of intolerance and violence against Jews was behind them, but the violence indicated that this was by no means the case. They therefore concluded that there was no hope for Jews in Europe and that they had to return to their ancient homeland to establish an independent Jewish state. The movement which formed around this way of thinking was Zionism. Zionists were united in the belief that a Jewish state would give Jews refuge from persecution, and it would give them back their dignity after two millennia of exile. A Jewish state would allow Jews to recapture the glories of the biblical era when they had been a free and independent nation.

The Zionist enterprise became much more urgent in light of the Holocaust. With the murder of six million Jews in World War II—fully one third of the Jewish people in the world at the time—the need for a Jewish state was felt even more keenly by Jews throughout the world. Finally, in 1947 the state of Israel was brought into existence by a vote in the United Nations that partitioned Palestine into Arab and Jewish sectors.

Jews regarded the creation of Israel as a great triumph, and yet it quickly became clear that the new Jewish state would not solve the problem of Jewish insecurity—at least, not immediately. In fact, in some ways it made Jews *more* insecure. The early Jewish settlers in Palestine had already discovered that the indigenous Arab population and the surrounding Arab countries viewed them as invaders. The relationship between the early Zionists and the Arab Palestinians was therefore plagued by frequent eruptions of violence. When the state of Israel was created, they found themselves at war with several Arab nations, and even though the the Jews emerged as victors, several more wars would be fought between Israel and its neighbors in the coming decades.

From a Jewish perspective, the Arabs looked like all the other non-Jewish enemies the Jews had faced throughout history. The Arabs were no different from the Babylonians, Romans, medieval Christians and Muslims—or the Nazis for that matter—in being determined to persecute Jews. Anti-Jewish hatred was viewed as an age-old sickness in the non-Jewish soul that was incurable. The Jewish state therefore became the focal-point for Jews in redressing the wrongs they had experienced throughout the centuries.

At present, the insecurity that Jews feel is as great as at any time since the founding of the state of Israel. Hamas resides on one border, while Hezbollah resides on another, and both would like to see Israel destroyed. Tens of millions of Arabs in the region share the same sentiments. It is strongly suspected that Iran is developing nuclear weapons and its President has recommended that Israel be “wiped off the map.” Moreover, there are only 14 million Jews in the world, and almost half of them live in Israel. Therefore, the destruction of Israel would be akin to a second Holocaust.

Let us now look at the Muslim perspective. As with Jews, Muslims began their history in a triumphant mode. The first two centuries of Islamic history saw the rapid expansion of Islam into a major empire and its establishment was viewed by Muslims as a sign of divine favor. In the centuries that followed, divine favor seemed to shine on the Islamic empire in other ways as well. Throughout most of the medieval period, the Islamic world was superior to Christian Europe in military and economic strength. It was also more advanced in a range of intellectual pursuits, most notably science and philosophy.

However, by the early modern period, the superiority of the Islamic empire began to erode. Christian Europe experienced rapid growth in economic power as European trade expanded into Asia and the New World, and its military might also increased. It also made great progress in the sciences as the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation inspired a new dynamism and creativity in Western learning.

I should emphasize that the decline in the fortunes of the Islamic empire was a decline only in the material realm, and it says nothing about the realm of the spirit. In the areas of religion, values, and ethics, one could argue that the Islamic world in the early modern period was no worse than the Christian world and may have been superior. Still, the important point for our purposes is that in the early modern period the Islamic world began losing ground to Christian Europe, at least from a material standpoint.

The growing strength of Christian Europe allowed it to exert influence over large parts of the Islamic world through colonial expansion. This domination was formalized in the wake of World War I when the Ottoman empire, which had been on the losing side of the war, was divided into pieces that were distributed to the victorious European

countries. The relationship of Europeans with the Islamic lands that they ruled was both exploitative and paternalistic. The European powers enriched themselves economically by controlling the natural resources of the regions over which they had power. They also ruled their Muslim subjects with the belief that the latter would benefit from being educated in the ways of a “superior” European culture.

A wide range of reactions greeted the encroachments of Europe on the Islamic world. Some Muslims were eager to adopt European ways. Other Muslims wanted to find a compromise between European and Islamic culture. Still others rejected European culture and values and decried the imposition of European ways on their society.

Events since the middle of the twentieth century have strengthened the hand of this last group. The U.S. has replaced Europe as the leading source of Western influence in the Islamic world—militarily, economically, and culturally—and its involvement in the Islamic world has bred enormous resentment in all sectors of Muslim society. Palestine has been a flash-point for this resentment. By the second half of the twentieth century, Muslims won back their independence from Western colonial powers almost everywhere but Palestine, and Zionism and the creation of the state of Israel were widely viewed by Muslims as an attempt by the West to maintain its hold on the Islamic world. Thus, for Muslims, opposition to Israel has become synonymous with their continuing fight for independence and dignity. The U.S. invasion of Iraq has only strengthened Muslim suspicions regarding the intentions of the West.

What does this selective survey of Jewish and Muslim history prove? I believe that there are remarkable parallels between the two histories. First, both Jews and Muslims have faced similar challenges. For centuries, Jewish history was defined by

insecurity and humiliation, of Jews being dominated by others, and their worst experiences were in Christian Europe. Since the early modern period, Muslims have also had to grapple with insecurity and humiliation primarily as a result of being dominated by Christian Europe.

Second, both Jews and Muslims have focused on similar solutions for reasserting their independence and dignity. Jews have attempted to return to their ancient homeland to establish a Jewish state with the goal getting back what was lost during the initial era of Jewish history in which Jews were a free and independent nation. Muslims have also attempted to throw off foreign rule in order to recapture the freedom and independence of the initial era of their history when they were a triumphant empire.

Third, both sides feel they have fallen short of their goals and continue to be victims of those intent on dominating them, and Israel-Palestine has been the focal-point of these concerns. On the Jewish side is the belief that the well-being of world Jewry is intimately tied in with the survival of the state of Israel, and Jews are in a life-and-death struggle to defend it from its enemies. And even though the enemies are now Muslims, not Christians, Jews see anti-Jewish hatred as a perennial sickness in the non-Jewish soul, so that as far as Jews are concerned there is a continuity between the anti-Semitism of medieval Christians and that of modern Muslims. Yet, Muslims feel that it is they who are the victims. The West still dominates the Muslim world by meddling in its affairs, and Palestine remains in the hands of the Jews because of the military backing of the U.S. In addition, Jews are able to exert influence because they are a powerful people politically and economically with much clout both in the U.S. and the international arena.

Therefore, Jews, Christians, and the Western world as a whole are united in suppressing Islamic civilization.

However, despite the similarities outlined here, dialogue between Jews and Muslims, in my experience, rarely deals with these basic issues because there is too much focus on the more immediate political concerns of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Yet, if Jews and Muslims do not deal with the fears and indignities that are deeply embedded in their respective psychologies, it is unlikely that the more immediate conflict between Israelis and Palestinians will ever be resolved. And the irony is that the underlying psychologies of Jews and Muslims are remarkably similar on key issues. Each side should be able to relate to the other side because each is, in many respects, a mirror-image of the other.

I do not want to minimize the differences between Jews and Muslims and their respective historical experiences. I also expect that my Jewish and Muslim readers will point to differences between their respective historical experiences in order to magnify the suffering of their own people while minimizing the suffering of the other side. In fact, this is precisely what happens when I raise the issues discussed in this essay in dialogues with Jews and Muslims. Jews often argue that they have been victimized more than Muslims because Muslims have never been landless as Jews were for two thousands years, nor did Muslims ever experience anything as bad as the Holocaust. Muslims often argue that at present they are being victimized more than Jews because the U.S. and Israel are far more threatening to the Muslim world than vice versa due their military might, and Jews in general have great influence within the U.S. and the international arena.

But to argue in this fashion is to miss point. What is being called for here is that Jews and Muslims understand each other in the other's *own terms*. When people are consumed by such emotions as fear and humiliation—as is the case on both sides here—there is little point in convincing them that they should get over it because someone else has had it worse. For Jews and Muslims, fear and humiliation have become all-encompassing experiences that define the realities of each side. Therefore, each group must accept the testimony of the other regarding its own experiences and make every attempt to put themselves into the shoes of the other. And once again what they will discover is that they ultimately have a great deal common. If indeed Jews and Muslims are both willing to make an effort to see the world as the other side does, it may be possible to move forward toward a more peaceful relationship. In short, I am urging Muslims and Jews to recognize that there is potential for solidarity between them, even in the midst of the violence that engulfs them.