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**Religions as motors of fanaticism or reconciliation:  
The Middle East conflict in global context**

Religions are social institutions that regulate human relations with the creator, whether individually or collectively; in turn, these relations are reflected in our day-to-day interactions with one another. In essence, then, religion involves the way in which we approach and revere the divine – the wellspring of all that is good – and the way in which we are inspired by this experience to organise our personal and social lives to be consistent with it. Violence has no place in this conception: it works to degrade both creation and creator. Hence, our principal struggle, that which Muslims call the ‘greater *jihad*,’ is to use our free will to overcome selfish, destructive impulses to draw closer to the divine.

No religion advocates violence. However, as Kierkegaard famously stated, faith, by definition, is irrational. Consequently, once our emotions are brought into play – when we witness, for instance, great destruction or great injustice, or the memory of it is reawakened by some shocking event – our beliefs and the religions that give them order often enter into the equation as well. Sometimes, we are seeking comfort or an explanation for the event, particularly if we have been personally affected. Sometimes, we want to ensure that it never happens again and draw our relatives, friends – even complete strangers – into a faith-driven search for solutions. And, sometimes, we want nothing more than vengeance and try to find some justification for it in religious teachings. On such occasions, we may fall prey to demagogues – those who seek personal gain, whether material advantage or raw power, and who try to achieve it by perverting all that is best in us and our most cherished beliefs.

Religious belief is a powerful form of human energy that may be used for good or for ill. Religious practices, symbols and structures are intended to harness that energy and to place it in the service of the creative principle. The choice is ours: that is, after all, the meaning of free will. However, this choice is obscured when we speak of collectivities, rather than individuals. Since each of us has free will, there is always the possibility, when we gather together, that our separate choices will conflict. Religions may fragment into sects or new ones may come into being. Some people may give up on religion altogether and follow a secular path. In all cases, religious identity may come up against other, competing identities. Moral or ethical principles may falter in the face of seemingly intractable obstacles. And, almost invariably, politics, another system to organise society, comes into play. Indeed, many would argue that religion and its underlying principles are concerned with the ideal, with things as they should be, while politics tries to grapple with the reality, with things as they are. Too often, however, politics is all about perception. Obviously, ‘perception’ here does not refer to

the intuitive recognition of some eternal truth: that definition would bring us back to the realm of ideals. Rather, I am referring to how reality is filtered through the lens of what we know or think that we know and how that lens is often constructed, in large part, by others, chiefly by key political players and the mass media.

In North America in particular, but in Europe as well, television viewers are fed a steady diet of images that reinforce notions of Muslim difference. Typically, news coverage of the Middle East will feature a demonstration or a funeral; a crowd of angry, shouting, bearded young men – the image tightly-framed to obscure their modest numbers; a few women, heavily-veiled and clutching their gowns or the hands of ill-kept children; and some very weary soldiers – American? British? Israeli? – who are meant to be the heroes of the piece: they, at least, have familiar-looking faces and seem to be trying to impose order upon chaos. If the viewer actually listens to the commentary, certain words are repeated with monotonous regularity: war, militant, Islam, Islamist, terror, terrorist. What emotions, I wonder, will these words and images evoke? Incomprehension? Repugnance? Fear? Hatred? How much stronger is that reaction now, a little more than two years after 11 September?

Many of the same images will appear in news broadcasts in the Middle East; indeed, they will make up the lion's share of coverage since they represent local or regional news. But here, reactions will differ. The funeral provokes bitter memories and murmured blessings. The desperate pleas of the young men – so reminiscent of sons, brothers, friends – are clearly understood, for they are in Arabic. And the expression in a woman's eyes raises so many questions: Where is her husband? Dead? Arrested? How will she feed her children? Needless to say, the soldiers, well-armed, well-protected, are the villains, the arrogant instruments of a repressive occupation. Their political leaders invariably make an appearance to issue warnings, threats and ultimatums. Do these words and images also evoke incomprehension, repugnance, fear and hatred? To whom are these feelings directed?

I have never subscribed to the thesis, first put forward in the early 1990s, that a clash of civilisations was inevitable. And I still do not. But Huntington's warning threatens to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Certainly, some Islamists took discussion of this thesis in the West as being tantamount to a declaration of pre-emptive war. And many in the West have gratefully seized upon the notion as offering new compass points for a new world order. Thus, although religion is not a genuine point of contention, it is increasingly being portrayed as such through the use of a kind of mindless shorthand that labels and stigmatises the 'other.' The media is the primary culprit in this respect, taking its lead from intellectuals and political leaders unwilling to confront the real issues that serve to separate East and West. Foremost among these is the Palestine question. To those in the Middle East, the failure of Western leaders to address the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis seems almost deliberate. Worse still, it threatens to fuel the regional instability now on the rise owing to the dismal failure of the 'road-map' for peace in Palestine and the inconclusive wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Arabs and Muslims the world over sympathise with the plight of the Palestinian people. In fact, their support is so overwhelming that opportunists as varied as Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden have attempted to hijack the Palestinian cause to garner legitimacy for themselves. But there is more than sentiment at work here. Pragmatically speaking, Arab states cannot move forward until the Palestine question is peacefully and equitably resolved. But while most Arab leaders recognise this fact, few Western leaders realise that the same holds true for their own countries as well. In other words, the Palestine question is a global question. It not only affects the relations between Palestinians and Israelis or between Arabs and Israelis or even between Muslims and the West; it has intruded into relations between the United States and Europe by way of Iraq.

It is no secret that peace and stability are the prerequisites for genuine economic, political and social development, not merely in the Middle East, but in all parts of the world. Coercive measures, however, cannot suppress or contain the militancy sustained by a burning sense of injustice. The best example of this truism is the first *intifada* (1987-1991), which only ended when Israel agreed to open negotiations with the Palestinians. Unfortunately, the expectations raised by this development have fallen dramatically and dangerously, although no reasonable person believes that force – or terrorism – will resolve the crisis. The same may be said, of course, of the present occupation of Iraq. Indeed, Arabs and Muslims see disturbing parallels between the way in which the Israeli occupiers have treated Palestinians and the way in which American occupiers behave toward Iraqis. More worrying still is the danger of Palestinian fighting Palestinian and Iraqi fighting Iraqi: in other words, of simultaneous civil wars breaking out in the region.

In both Palestine and Iraq, religion is a red herring. All Palestinians are not Muslim fundamentalists: many are moderate Muslims, some are secularists, some are Christians. Israeli Jews are not the enemy because they are Jewish, but because they are occupiers and settlers. Saddam Hussein is a Sunni, but he is also a secular Baathist and his religious affiliation is less significant than his political and tribal ones. Kurds are not a separate religious group, as our Western television viewer may surmise, but rather an ethnic group that happens to be almost exclusively Sunni. Ansar al-Islam, the group said to have had contacts with al-Qaida before the war on Iraq, is not Arab, but Kurdish. And so on.

Clearly, there are relationships and tensions within the region that are unconnected to religion or, at least, to the image of Islam disseminated by the Western media and its pundits. The reality is much more complex than the perception. And clearly, too, there are many pressing issues, in addition to Palestine, that are also unrelated to religion. Regional security and stability are further challenged by the notion, shared by many in the Middle East, that the natural resources of Arab countries, particularly oil and water – one vital to the global economy, the other critical to neighbouring Western allies, such as Israel and Turkey – are the real sources of Western interest in the region. Some

might add that the Arab world's value as an arms market is also pivotal, for vendors from United States, France, the United Kingdom and Russia earn billions of American dollars every year from the sale of weapons locally. Indeed, the Middle East is currently the most militarised region in the world.

The solutions for problems such as these involve neither religion nor violence. They require consultations, negotiations and agreements which are equitable and binding upon all of the parties. The issue of water resources might certainly be handled in this way, as well as access to energy through transnational pipelines and regional electricity grids. Similarly, the best response to military escalation involves security agreements and arms control. The recent focus upon the presence of so-called weapons of mass destruction in the region directs attention away from the fact that today's 'conventional' weapons are utterly devastating. This is not to say, however, that the region – and, indeed, the entire world – would not benefit if all Middle Eastern states, including Israel, agreed to repudiate the development, possession and use of nuclear weapons, as well as chemical and biological agents, and to submit to regular inspections by international regulatory agencies.

But the key to regional peace and stability is an equitable negotiated settlement to the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. I cannot emphasise this fact enough. The assassination of Palestinian militants, including members of political branches of Islamist parties, will not end violence against Israeli civilians. The shameful attacks on busloads of innocent Israeli families will not cause settlers to flee. The mass arrest of innocent Palestinians, children included, and their long-term incarceration will not lead to any positive change in the way that the occupiers are seen. The construction of a wall between Israel and the West Bank will not free Israelis from their memories of European ghettos and their terrible sufferings in them.

All of these approaches are destructive: they hurt both the Palestinians and the Israelis. The international community – and, particularly, the United States, Israel's closest ally – must commit itself to helping both parties to make difficult, but necessary, choices. The final goal is clear: two states living in peace and managing their own affairs. This does not require a wall, merely acceptable borders that recognise what the international community has long said: that the territories captured by Israel so many years ago belong to Palestinians, Lebanese, Syrians, but not to Israelis. The immediate recognition by Israel of a Palestinian state, with negotiation of the details to follow, would go far to convince Palestinians that Israelis are committed to a two-state solution and that the promise of peace – and the process itself – is not merely a ruse. In return, the international community could pledge to oversee bilateral security arrangements and Palestinians to uphold stringent laws against armed insurgents. Similar security measures could be negotiated between Israel and her other Arab neighbours, once Israel's borders with Palestine, Lebanon and Syria are settled.

Clearly, many other issues would remain, for instance the status of Jerusalem, the Palestinian right of return and Israeli settlements. All of them will require compromises on both sides. For instance, Israeli sovereignty over Jerusalem will never be recognised internationally without Palestinian consent and that will only be forthcoming if Palestinians receive a portion of the city for their own capital and some measure of control over the Haram al-Sharif. Jewish settlements and the Palestinian right of return are closely connected. No Palestinian living in a refugee camp in Gaza, the West Bank, or a neighbouring Arab state will ever accept his or her inability to return home, or even to a new Palestinian state, while Jewish settlers enjoy territory occupied decades after the establishment of the state of Israel. Recognition of the legal right of return, however, is not the same as actual return and the payment of compensation plus measures to grant legal status to Palestinian refugees in host countries may form some of the elements of a compromise. Similarly, while many Israeli settlements would have to be dismantled, those closest to the Israeli/Palestinian border might be accommodated through border adjustments. For the present, however, all construction at settlements must be unconditionally frozen: 'natural growth' is still growth and, to Palestinians, there is nothing natural about it.

These are, of course, just suggestions, for the final settlement will depend upon the parties to the conflict. Success depends upon their willingness to abide by it and that will only happen if they themselves are responsible for the hard decisions. But a final settlement there must be. Hence, the earlier practice of delaying the most challenging issues indefinitely cannot be repeated, for they are potentially future flashpoints.

Any indication of an honest effort to address these issues would lead to an immediate decrease in current levels of tension in the Middle East, in Muslim countries and in the West. This would provide governments, religious leaders and international agencies with the breathing space needed to evaluate the other causes, in addition to the Arab/Israeli conflict, that have led to the current situation – particularly those related political and economic development. All iniquity is exploited by demagogues.

In summary, despite popular perceptions, Middle Eastern and, therefore, global instability are not the consequence of religious differences and intolerance. They are indicative of the lack of any political will to address, in particular, the fundamental question of Palestine. But although religion is not the problem, it can play a valuable, reconciliatory role while a political solution is being crafted. Indeed, religions possess a moral authority that can be invaluable in encouraging the peaceful settlement of seemingly intractable problems and in healing the wounds that they occasion. They are the perfect vehicles for dialogue within and between societies cleft by cultural divides. This is fortunate for, as time passes, the solutions to our common problems, particularly armed conflict, remain the same, but they can be much more difficult to implement. For many years now, I have been working to detach religion from the erroneous perception that it is responsible for failing political processes. I urge you to join me in setting the record straight.