

NO RELIEF FROM THE WAR OF WORDS. AND YET, SPEAK WE MUST!

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If there is a text that has been overly analyzed then the conflict in the Middle East is it. Of course, we know that textual analysis does not yield moral imperatives. Furthermore, given the current escalation of violence, everything short of political action to stop the madness seems frivolous.

All things considered, responses have been relatively moderate (I don't see, for example, that torchings of synagogues in France amount to a new Kristallnacht, as some have been saying). Instead of decisive action to stop the madness, there have been suggestions, declarations, demands, in other words: words. No ultimatum, no real threat of realizable sanctions have been put before either warring party. What is the reason for this? Perhaps it is because the only power who could exert a credible force, the US, is caught up in its own war on terrorism, a war whose rhetoric has reconfigured international relations. This reconfiguration has divided the world in those who are with us and those who are against us. Hence the US is condemned to misread the current form of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Since 9/11, the Sharon government has acted under the shield of the call to an alliance against terrorism, i.e., he acts with impunity protected by war mongering rhetoric and politics of the Bush

administration. From the perspective of this rhetoric, Arafat's "relevance" depends on whether or not he reigns in the suicide bombers. Failing to do so, whether for lack of want or lack of trying, he has lost all right to American support, leaving all necessary action to Israel.

If one considers the current conflict from any other perspective, one, for example, that takes into account the savage inequality between the combatants, the decades of humiliation that preceded the current outbreak of violence, or one that looks at the track record of both political elites in regard to their respective readiness to compromise, in short, if one looks at the problem from any other perspective than the one imposed by the American war on terrorism, then things begin to look more complicated. But when things look complicated, we're back where we started from when we said that there is a tendency to over-analyze the Israeli- Palestinian conflict, a trend that comes at the expense of decisive action.

Right now, the initiative belongs to the most violent and uncompromising forces on both sides, the ones that have set aside the complexity of analysis for the sake of decisive action (or, in the case of Arafat, deliberate inaction). During the Clinton years, Israel and all of those not directly affected allowed themselves to ignore the ongoing humiliation of the Palestinian people and its ever more effective exploitation by the radical religious and nationalist ideologues. Barak's failure to connect with Arafat and Sharon's calculated provocation (his visit to the Haram as-Sharif or Temple Mount) ignited the all-too-dry kindling and released all the sleeping demons.

Us talkers have no real influence, it seems, especially when all the talking is done by human bombs and heavy artillery. Yet, short of immediate political influence, what remains and must not be relinquished to the would-be Alexanders, Napoleons, and Hitlers is the responsible and rational reading of the conflict, involving, among others, a thinking about the language, symbols, analogies, and judgments we use to decipher it. One of the conceptual conflicts that arise among the discussants of the political conflict concerns the legitimacy of gnosticizing or dichotomizing language in the context of politics. In the world of polite discourse, all

radical differences are shunned and considered gauche. But the same is not true in the world of political discourse. The recent revival of the language of good and evil was not accidental and it was not by chance accompanied by military engagement. War is not a matter of “*apres vous*” but of either/or, namely, of either you or I. Peace, on the other hand, is a matter of recognizing that both parties have the same interest and an equal right to such interest and that, hence, there is a need to compromise: a need to recognize the other as another I, or even as a You. Hence, also, the great hope invested in direct talks, such as the ones conducted in Oslo. (Hence, also, the significance of the hesitant handshake between Arafat and Rabin, of the lack of chemistry between Barak and Arafat, and of the fact that neither George W. Bush nor Ariel Sharon speak to Arafat directly.)

To repeat, right now prevails the language of war, the rhetoric of irreconcilable opposites. But politics cannot and must not be reduced or limited to it. The Bush administration has in fact been attacked for wavering between the uncompromising rhetoric of war and the rhetoric of accommodation. In my view, however, the Bush team has shown wisdom in this very lack of consistency and it is to be commended for it. Political language cannot be consistent since it is always at risk. It exists in a realm of war and peace, in the face of the other, and without certain knowledge of what the other will do or say next.

One may, and perhaps should, revile both Sharon and Arafat. Both have long since outstayed their political usefulness but both are loath to admit it. Yet we are inhibited from saying so more strongly by the fact that, in the political sphere, it is impossible to know whether the tactic and influence of either man may not still contribute in some strange way to the desired result of peace (or, less extremely put, to a cease fire and the return to political negotiations). To relinquish judgment on the right path to these angry or desperate old men, however, means to shun a fundamental responsibility. We no longer inhabit a world where political office is a matter of class, race, gender, or profession. Modernity has bequeathed to each and all of us the burden of liberty, the charge to try to determine the course of public affairs. Nor can political conflicts, such as the one raging

between Israel and the Palestinians, be limited to the local players. All of us are more or less directly affected.

This sense of universal responsibility has given rise to a deafening war of words. Few of us limit themselves to newspapers anymore. Aside from television, the internet and diverse email-based discussions provide us with an enormous wealth of information and opinions. This is particularly true for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In contrast to the war in Afghanistan (and now perhaps Pakistan), Israel and the formerly autonomous areas of the PNA are accessible to news media and there continues to be a steady stream of images and words pouring forth from places like Ramallah and Bethlehem, despite all efforts of the Israeli military to the contrary. What one hears is sometimes meant to incite, but mostly conveys the despair and suffering imposed by the ongoing reoccupation of the West Bank.

What, then, are we to do? First of all, we must not silence our sense of right and wrong. As much as we may be inclined to stay out of a quarrel that seems destined to run its course, we don't have the luxury to let it go on. Second, we must do our utmost to stop the violence on both sides. This implies, among others, a careful distinction between the kinds of violence enacted by both sides. The situation is asymmetric. It used to be rocks against rubber bullets, and now it is random suicide bombings meant to terrorize and hurt as many civilians as possible at the cost of one's own life against tanks and armored vehicles destroying the infrastructure of an entire people, along with the lives of hundreds of individuals and families. Both sides hurt, but they hurt differently and for different reasons. The differences need to be kept in mind even as we must urge both sides to stop the violence. Third, most analysts agree that military action cannot uproot terrorist or guerrilla warfare. It can merely disrupt it. While, from the Israeli perspective, disruption of the terrorist infrastructure is a desirable and immediate goal, the means by which Israeli forces are proceeding seem to serve other, undisclosed ulterior ends as well. We must not allow the Sharon government to force us to ascent to the use of means that serve such undisclosed ulterior ends. If we want to prevent

this war from going on for another hundred years we must reign in the force unleashed by the butcher of Beirut, and we must do it now.