



REVIEW ESSAY

**Israel and Palestine: An Unbridgeable Chasm for Conflict Resolution?**

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**Palestine/Israel: Peace or Apartheid (second edition)**

Marwan Bishara

Zed Books, 2002

PBK: ISBN: 1552660974

pp. xiii + 173 (including: index & bibliographical references)

**Islam and the Myth of Confrontation**

Fred Halliday

I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1999 (reprinted 2003)

PBK: ISBN: 1850439591 £13.99

pp. vii + 255 (including: notes & index)

**What Went Wrong?**

Bernard Lewis

Oxford University Press, 2002

ISBN: 0195144201

pp. vii + 180 (including: bibliographical references & notes)

**The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror**

Bernard Lewis

The Modern Library, 2003

HBK: ISBN: 0679642811 \$19.95

pp. 224

**Blaming the Victims**

Edward W. Said, and Christopher Hitchens, editors

Verso, 2001

ISBN: 1-85984-340-9

pp. v + 296 (including: bibliography, index)

*The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.*

Eleanor Roosevelt

*Past thinking and methods do not prevent world war. Future thinking must...*

Albert Einstein

***What can be said or done?***

Paraphrasing God's promise to Abraham regarding the size of the intended Israelite population (Genesis 15.5), books on the Middle East, the relationship between the West and Islam, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are 'as numerous as the stars in the sky.' This essay seeks to review a current sampling of the literature on the Palestinian-Israeli relationship. Though prospects for peace between Israelis and Palestinians, and by implication for other aspects of the Middle East conflict as well, appear less than sanguine at this point, there should always remain at least some hope that the combatants will eventually work together, and, with outside assistance, arrive at a just settlement for



both peoples. After a hiatus of almost four years there are again some promising signs for peace including the recent Geneva protocol negotiated by Yossi Beilin, former Minister of Justice under Ehud Barak's Labor Government, and Yasir Abed Rabbo, former Information Minister for the Palestinian Authority. This protocol, similar in intent to the stillborn results of the Taba Conference in January of 2001, offers the potential for renewed beginnings of conflict resolution between Israelis and Palestinians. As with anything else in this troubled conflict, time will tell.

The plain fact is that past attempts at conflict resolution between Palestinians and Israelis have not worked, and it is incumbent upon the practitioner to understand why. Is it due to what some perceive as a brutal Israeli occupation or is it due to Palestinian intransigence when presented with politically realistic proposals from their Israeli interlocutors? Perhaps the truth lies somewhere in between, but the fact is that Palestinians and Israelis have arrived at a dynamic in their conflict resolution negotiations with each other that does not facilitate peace. This essay offers some suggestions based upon the books referenced above, and provides recommendations as to how the obstacles that entangle these two peoples might be made to disappear. The aforementioned books were chosen owing to timeliness and to establish a setting in the literature for this troubled relationship. These works are descriptive of the emotional context that exists between these two peoples, but they are not necessarily descriptive of a strategic approach to conflict resolution between Israelis and Palestinians, especially in light of the cultural and ethnic milieu that divides them.

#### ***Is there a cognitive disconnect between Israelis and Palestinians?***

The disconnect between these two peoples exists because in addition to the obvious religious differences, there is and has been a breakdown in cross-cultural communications. In this instance the cognitive disconnect has both contributed to the conflict and hindered these peoples' ability to achieve peace. The first aspect of cognitive dissonance is reflected in their diverse language structures and communication styles. Using the work of Raymond Cohen as a model (Cohen 1997) the Palestinians can be described as a high-context people and the Israelis as low. According to Cohen, '[a] high context culture communicates allusively rather than directly.' Cohen goes on to note that, '[a]s important as the explicit content of a message are the context in which it occurs, surrounding nonverbal cues, and hinted-at nuances of meaning' (Cohen 1997 : 31). Low-context cultures such as the Israelis, described by Cohen, tend to display a more direct get-to-the-point communications style. The result is two different negotiating communication styles hindered by translations between at least three different languages (Arabic, Hebrew, and English).

The second cognitive disconnect between these two peoples, described in the work of Kirsten Schulze (1999), reflects the perception that their negotiating approaches are primarily maximalist with neither side being willing, except under extreme pressure from outside political actors, such as the United States and the European Union, to step back from the brink of absolute confrontation. She notes, '[t]he pattern that emerges is one of entrenched positions, dubious motives, poor timing, uninspired leadership and psychological obstacles' (Schulze 1999: 96).

Disconnect number three for these two peoples reflects the elite behavioral pattern that in times of crisis, the political control in both societies tends to become concentrated in the hands of the radicals whose primary modus operandi is to cease negotiations and create policies that seek to eradicate their opponents.

The fourth cognitive disconnect is how cultural differences affect the decision making process of these two peoples. Israelis and Palestinians are simply 'wired' differently with

respect to their approach to decision making. According to the cultural identifier methodology of Geert Hofstede, these differences are distinguished by the fact that the Israelis tend to be individualistic and make decisions using a generally flat decision making hierarchy. Conversely, the Palestinians reflect more of a collective society and exhibit a hierarchical decision making style (Hofstede 1997). Sadly, the cultural identifier that both sides share is an enhanced tendency for confrontation and conflict. Unfortunately this tendency has been reflected throughout the Twentieth and early Twenty-First centuries and has most recently been demonstrated in the revenge-based scenario characterized by the behavior of both sides in the Second Intifada, beginning in September of 2000.

The fifth cognitive disconnect is that the leadership of both societies have been poor managers of their individual 'street's' expectations. Whether this reflects an isolation of the elite on both sides or the fact that they are surrounded by numerous factions with powerful and competing interests, the sense is that except for condoning confrontation, no one appears to want to take the type of decision made by Anwar Sadat in making peace with Israel, and lead. This is further compounded by the fact that all the players on both sides know each other quite well and have broken bread with each other in their homes on numerous occasions.

Finally, the last disconnect is that despite strong tendencies towards hospitality in both societies, their nationalist historical narratives and historical justifications for their own existence at the expense of the other paradoxically confines them to the constraints of geography: they are basically two peoples with aspirations for the same land.

### **What Do the above Books Bring to Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Resolution Efforts?**

There are several broad themes for conflict resolution between Israelis and Palestinians in the books reviewed. The first theme is the continuing impact of the concept of 'Orientalism' both on the literature and on attempts at reconciliation between Palestinians and Israelis. One of the aspects of Orientalism is Edward Said's use of it to convey a strategy of alleged Western superiority, wherein it is used by scholars of the West to convey popular misrepresentations of the Arab World (Said 1979: 285), to distort cultural relations with the Arab and Muslim World, and the perceived simplicity of Islam with reference to Western religious practices. The sense of this throughout is that Orientals do not measure up to Occidentals. This has obvious overtones for both Palestinians and Israelis and their acceptance by the rest of the world. Bernard Lewis has attempted to address these perceived inequities, but his explanations may not be enough to mollify the disciples of the late Edward Said (Lewis 2002).

Lewis and Said have been waging a battle over Orientalism for over twenty years. Lewis views the struggle in light of the necessity for Westerners and others to seek to understand the Arab and/or Muslim historical setting. Said contends that though it may be appropriate for Westerners to 'understand' the Arabs and Islam, they often miss the point because their conclusions are based upon their own historical biases. Said's work will be discussed more fully in a moment, however, for the practitioner of ethnic conflict resolution, of these two, Lewis' work entitled the *Crisis of Islam* (Lewis 2003) offers compelling insights into both the concept of Islamism, and by implication with reference to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the influence of Hamas on Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution efforts. Since Lewis' conclusion may also be perceived by some as another example of cognitive disconnect between these approaches and therefore is subject to interpretation depending upon which side of the Orientalism issue you embrace. Both sides have merit. How would a conflict resolution facilitator utilize both sides of the Orientalism argument as portrayed by Said and Lewis? For example, the role of a



facilitator of conflict resolution is to arrive at a conclusion based upon study and experience regarding the approaches and goals of the opposing interlocutors to the conflict. In that way this type of individual can arrive at a reasoned judgment as to what it is that both sides want and then design a strategy to increase the chances of a mutually beneficial conclusion. However, based upon Edward Said's approach can this person who is not of the culture ever arrive at an approach that defines the culture?

Lewis cautions that Westerners, and by implication conflict resolution practitioners, must understand the reach of Islam in Muslim societies. This is further confirmed by his retelling of the saga of Sayyid Qutb, founder of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and a strong influence on Hamas movement in present day Palestine. He observes that, 'Muslims tend to see not a nation subdivided into religious groups but a religion subdivided into nations' (Lewis 2003: xx). This has broad implications for the community of Arab and indeed Muslim support for the Palestinian cause as is evidenced by various calls for *jihad* in its 'martial' interpretation. Lewis notes that *jihad* can be characterized both defensively as moral striving, and offensively as armed struggle (Lewis 2003: 30). Both interpretations carry relevance for conflict resolution. With respect to the idea of moral striving, *jihad* can be perceived as a moral striving with respect to the adherence to and use of Islamic religious goals to improve the ethics and morality of one's life. This is not necessarily an impediment to conflict resolution but rather serves as a guide to righteous living. The martial interpretation of *jihad* can have implications that deter conflict resolution efforts since its tendency is exclusive rather than inclusive, and does not necessarily seek reconciliation as either a tactic or a strategy.

The second broad theme for conflict resolution efforts as discussed in these works manifests itself in obstructionist behavior. Unfortunately, this conflict is typified by obstructionism on both sides. This approach, and its ideology, is represented in this review by the work of Marwan Bishara (2002), and Edward Said and Christopher Hitchens (2001). This is not to say that the writings herein are not heartfelt grievances and are well-meaning and well-intentioned. Neither society has a premium on those types of individuals whose behavior encourages radical polarization for whatever the reason either justified or not. Said (and Hitchens), as noted earlier, have for many years made significant contributions toward nurturing the Palestinian historical narrative. Their literary review encourages a sense of legitimacy in the Palestinian community and their supporters throughout the world. Obviously this is subject to interpretation by the supporters of Israel, and sadly reflects an argument that will never be resolved since both sides are so polarized. The key point here is that Said and Hitchens strongly argue for their point of view in support of Palestine. However, from the point of view of a conflict resolution practitioner their work is self-justifying and does little to help the 'peace constituencies' and innocent individuals in both societies.

Said and Hitchens' work is not only thought provoking but it also encourages new thinking as in Edward Said's compelling 'Canaanite's' response to Michael Walzer's *Exodus and Revolution*. Said contends that Walzer's 'Exodus Politics' sets a precedent for the sins of orientalism. He suggests that Walzer develops Moses as a popular leader on a mission to free his people from bondage and by implication to establish the ethical relationship of man/woman to God. Though he believes that there is merit in Walzer's approach, where he differs with Walzer and Jewish-Christian theology, is in the status of the peoples, primarily Canaanite (read Arab), who in his words were displaced by the Children of Israel performing their mission inspired by God. His interpretation rings poignantly for today's struggles between Israelis and Palestinians, but does not necessarily facilitate conflict resolution. (Said and Hitchens 2001: 161).

Marwan Bishara's work also fits into this category. Bishara has been inextricably linked to Israel, surviving in the nether world as an Israeli-Arab. His views are forged in the crucible of resistance to what he perceives as Israeli 'apartheid.' He argues that the peace process during the 1990s was a failure since, '[t]he Oslo process must, first and foremost, be understood in its historic and geo-strategic contexts. It resulted only after a series of fruitless Israeli attempts to defuse the Palestinian question without resolving it' (Bishara 2002: 3). What he neglects to mention in this work that the failure had two fathers, both Israeli and Palestinian. This latter concept is ably demonstrated in the work of Charles Enderlin (2003) who, writing from the perspective of diplomatic history, discusses first how close the leaders of both sides are to each other personally, and secondly, that neither, for various political/personal reasons or otherwise, was able to consummate peace either at Camp David II in September of 2000, or at the Taba Conference in January of 2001.

Sadly, though both Said and Bishara are passionate and indeed persuasive from their points of view, neither offers substantively constructive suggestions for bridging the chasm between Israel's security and Palestine's legitimacy needs that Bishara presciently depicts as the gap between Israel's 'culture of impunity' and the suicide bombers (Bishara 2002: xxi).

Fred Halliday's work under review here represents the third broad theme; i.e., the middle path between Orientalism and obstructionism (Halliday 1999). In his work, we begin to see a glimmer of constructive insights for conflict resolution between these two peoples. Halliday uses a comparative approach and argues forcefully against the concept of Middle East particularism. His work serves as the middle ground between Lewis and Said. Though he believes that it is necessary to develop a thorough understanding of the issues that separate the combatants such as Israelis and Palestinians, he also contends that we should develop and implement approaches to conflict resolution that might have had some success in the resolution of ethnic disputes elsewhere. He suggests that the Arab-Israeli conflict is similar to others based upon the need to understand nationalist ideologies, and to perceive how either international issues such as globalism or the power of the Diaspora of both peoples can influence the local origins of a conflict. Issues of diversity, the effect of arbitrary national boundaries resulting from colonialism, and the tendency towards repressive rulers in the Arab world further complicate conflict resolution efforts.

Halliday also discusses what he views as the mythology of confrontation. This mythology has two sides. In the West:

Myths of racist hatred may begin as lies invented by idle xenophobes, but once conveyed into the political realm and diffused inter-ethnic contexts, they acquire a force and a reality they previously lacked. A similar process is occurring with the 'myth of confrontation' pertaining to Islam; propagated against Muslims, such myths are also taken by Islamists to provide justification for their own causes (Halliday 1999: 7).

This is precisely the problem with the radical elements in both Israel and Palestine, and the situation is further compounded for the Palestinians by the paradox of their rejection and acceptance of the international system as exemplified by the West and by proxy, Israel. The paradox for the Palestinians, according to Halliday, is that, on the one hand, they accept, or at least acknowledge the West's reputed technological advances while they are repelled by their perception of the West's moral and ethical values, on the other. The intent, whether stated specifically or not by Halliday, is that comparative analysis of



other ethnic conflicts, such as South Africa, Northern Ireland or Sri Lanka can provide insights into some form of mutual accommodation between Israelis and Palestinians.

### ***Suggestions and Conclusions***

There are a number of conclusions that can be drawn from the review of the works discussed here. The first concerns the crucial importance of nurturing the 'peace constituency' in both societies. Here those of an obstructionist tendency as represented by Said, Bishara, and Israeli groups such as the *Gush Emunim* cannot be permitted to overwhelm and occupy the constructive middle ground in both societies. Rejectionism as an intellectual exercise, though a tension reliever and self-justifier, does not help conflict resolution and adherence to its precepts is indicative of a desire not to find common ground with, but rather to destroy, one's opponent.

Second, efforts must be made, such as in the work of Ted Robert Gurr, to identify the predictors of protest and rebellion in ethnic conflicts at an earlier point in order to forestall conflict (Gurr 2000). Gurr has developed these predictors so that the causes that encourage rebellion and revolution can be hopefully addressed and resolved earlier in order to lessen the effects of conflict. For example, what if the issues that led to the Second Intifada in September of 2000 could have been identified at an earlier time?

Third, culturally appropriate negotiating styles must be crafted to mitigate the maximalist demands, as identified by Kirsten Schulze, and lead to the creation of an atmosphere of peaceful conflict resolution as described by Anthony Baird (1999) who argues that conventional methods of conflict resolution do not work in ethnic conflicts. Therefore, the emphasis must be placed on encouraging both peoples to see, experience and taste the benefits of peace by emphasizing their natural tendencies for hospitality (Baird 1999). This process requires an understanding of culture and history and is used by the conflict resolution facilitator to smooth over cultural negotiating styles so as to promote mutual benefits rather than the present day discords.

Fourth, Roger Fisher, under the auspices of the Harvard Negotiation Project, has developed excellent brainstorming strategies to further mutual understanding (Fisher, Kopelman, and Schneider 1996), and John Paul Lederach (1997) has presented constructive approaches based on creating a sustainable peace process after the conflict has ended. Fisher concentrates on increasing both sides' mutual knowledge of the pressures felt by their interlocutors, whereas Lederach sets up institutional strategies with established time lines to facilitate the implementation of peace.

Fifth, efforts must be made, based upon the suggestions of Raymond Cohen (1997) to decrease the level of dissonance in cross-cultural communications between these two peoples. The meaning and interpretation of communication must be attuned to both cultures and clearly understood by both interlocutors. Careful listening and using established methods of communications agreement to ensure that both sides both understand and respond in a mutually recognized manner to the other's messages could accomplish this.

Sixth, economic incentives for cooperation must be encouraged. There are already a number of people-to-people business initiatives that are in place, and incentives may also be provided by outside actors, such as the European Union or the United States, to encourage peaceful behavior.

Seventh, incitement and stereotyping by both sides must be resisted with all means necessary, especially in the education of children.

The eighth success criterion is that, owing to the so far intractable nature of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, progress must be facilitated in discrete chunks. This was the intent of President Bush's 'Roadmap for Peace,' but one wonders whether the appropriate tactics were used to flesh out the overall strategy.

Finally, since both sides prize relationship building, the personal chemistry between individuals at all levels of both societies must be reinvigorated.

The resolution or at least diminution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a difficult goal, but, as Fred Halliday notes, it may not be impossible based upon the precedent set by the resolution of other conflicts of a similar nature.

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