

Reciprocal Radicalization

July 1, 2011 Category: Israel-Palestine

Download as PDF

OVERVIEW:

The current manner in which the U.S. tries to address Revisionist Zionist (RZ) policy is based on two faulty assumptions:

- That a people living under a brutal occupation are in a position (logistically, emotionally) to effectively negotiate the terms of their liberation. The prospect of negotiating with an occupying military force is almost nil, as the power asymmetry precludes the possibility of any fair negotiation.

The Palestinians—oppressed, resentful, with almost no opportunities—can not be expected to use leverage they don't have in order to deal diplomatically with a force that controls everything from their movement (including that of the Palestinian negotiators themselves) to their water supply...from tax revenues to basic municipal infrastructure.

- That the U.S. can still insist on being a fair, effective arbiter even as it sustains Israel's occupation through military aid and diplomatic cover. So long as the U.S. is party to the horrific oppression, it undermines its credibility with those who are oppressed. Asking someone to cooperate while slapping them in the face is a non-starter.

Until these two faulty assumptions are no longer lent credence, the current predicament will remain intractable. Treating the Likud Party—the torch bearer of RZ—as if it is anything other than a cabal that facilitates human rights abuses is also highly problematic...even as he berate Hamas for engaging in violent retaliation. Indicting one side for its bigotry while implicitly supporting the bigotry of the other side is a morally reprehensible approach. If conduct is despicable when one group does it, it is despicable if anyone does it.

These two flawed assumptions are not only not addressed, they are rarely even acknowledged as assumptions. It's not that we're providing the wrong answers to important questions; it's that we're not even posing the right questions. Any mission to remedy a horrible situation is therefore doomed right out of the gates.

The motive for pretending that these two flawed assumptions are true is quite plain: The U.S. government sees the IG—just or unjust—as a key element in its economic / military strategy. It is thereby incentivized to stay in the good graces of RZ elements within the IG. To cease “playing ball” with the IG's appalling activities in Palestine would mean that the U.S. may forfeit the full-fledged cooperation of a strategic partner.

For foreign policy hawks, such an occurrence would be unacceptable.

And so it goes: Endorsing crimes against humanity is seen as “worth it” in the interest of economic / military strategy. Welcome to the m.o. of U.S. foreign policy since WWII. If a regime's remaining in power serves the agenda of U.S. corporations and of the Pentagon, then it will be supported—*no matter how heinous its conduct*. The examples of this are endless: Mubarak in Egypt, fascists in Greece, Zia-ul-Haz / Musharraf in Pakistan, Samozza (the Contras) in Nicaragua, Suharto in Indonesia, Batista in Cuba, the Apartheid regime in South Africa, Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Basayev in Chechnya, the Wahhabist theocrats in Saudi Arabia, Noriega in Panama, Montt in Guatemala, genocides in eastern Congo, the Shah in Iran,

The Likud Party is no different. The reasons are almost always the same: putting military / economic interests above basic human rights. The U.S. thus makes dubious “friends” a routine practice. They may do reprehensible things, but if it serves “U.S. interests”...human rights may be summarily relegated to the back-burner. If thousands must suffer and die, so be it...so long as they’re not Americans, it doesn’t matter.

This trend couldn’t be more glaring. The U.S. government’s support for RZ is, then, merely part of a larger pattern. Neocons within the U.S. government see this m.o. as unproblematic. Indeed, self-righteousness combined with a Manichean worldview makes the whole scheme seem perfectly legitimate. After all, what are the lives of poor peasants in Vietnam or El Salvador or Honduras or Palestine when U.S. corporate interests are at stake? There are profits to be made. Priorities, after all, are priorities.

(Christians may find it helpful to ask themselves, What would *Jesus* do?)

Meanwhile, radicals on the Palestinian side of the feud have based their case on two untenable expectations:

- That Palestinians who were expelled from the current land of Israel (as defined by pre-1967 borders) should have the “right of return”. This would involve as many as five million goyim resettling within what is currently *legitimate* Israeli land (i.e. the progeny of the 800,000 that were originally expelled). Any demand for such a measure must cease. In its place, requests for reparations / restitution (in the form of the IG’s funding of public infrastructure development in Palestine) would be in order. If the IG wants to conduct its immigration criteria on racist lines, it may be abhorrent, but that is its right *within its legitimate sovereign territory*. Ethnic purity within its pre-1967 borders—though appalling—is the IG’s own prerogative.
- That the IG should be expected to negotiate with any body of people that has as part of its policy—implicit or explicit—the eradication of Israel. Such a position is patently unacceptable. Therefore, the words “eliminate” (“elimination of”), “destroy” (“destruction of”) and “annihilate” (“annihilation of”) in reference to “Israel” or “Jews” must be categorically expunged from any proposal, charter, enterprise, or aspiration articulated by Palestinian leadership. No worthy endeavor calls for such drastic measures. By employing such language, a Palestinian forfeits his right to be taken seriously.

For decades now, U.S. policy has generally been dictated by a simple calculus: weighing the interests of *the privileged* with the suffering of people who—essentially—*don’t matter*. The former are entitled to their spoils while the latter are dispensable—acceptable collateral damage in pursuit of the grand American project. When you’re one of the privileged, what’s not to love about such an enticing game-plan?

The problem is that when one group dehumanizes the other, the view will be returned in kind. Neither party is consciously reciprocating the view as retaliation. (Nobody says, “If you dehumanize us, then we’ll just dehumanize you right back!”) Rather, BEING demeaned as *the other* sets one up to engage in the same defective mentality—as a defense mechanism. In other words, BEING dehumanized BY *the other*, one will tend more TO dehumanize *the other*. Each group dehumanizes one another, simply because it is *the other* TO the out-group. The out-group, then, is not just OTHER THAN us, it is an ANTAGONIST TO us. From each perspective, the predicament appears the same, and so the reactions mirror one another. Subconsciously, one says to oneself, “I am dehumanized BY the out-group, so I will tend to DEHUMANIZE the out-group.” A vicious cycle ensues.

THESIS:

Until the modus operandi of the U.S. is altered, the conflict in the Middle East will persist—as human rights will be irreconcilable with the Washington Consensus. How, then, shall we proceed in a manner in

keeping with the noble principles in the name of which we operate? Step number one is to turn mere lip service into genuine behavior. Actions speak louder than words. Thus far, U.S. foreign policy has been based on lofty pretense, not on strict adherence to principle. We enjoy saying that we're "promoting democracy" even as we flagrantly deter it.

The reach of a nation's power must never be farther than its moral grasp. In a civil world, moral projection is more important than power projection. For a State that genuinely values democracy, the latter must always be subordinate to the former. This is not to say that power doesn't matter within a noble venture. Nor is this to say that force has no role whatsoever in IR. Rather, it means that power must operate within the boundary conditions entailed by immutable principles.

Leading by the power of our example is far more compelling than trying to control by the example of our power. The moment force superiority is all one offers as one's advantage, one has ventured down a dangerous road. For then one abdicates the moral high ground out of sheer opportunism. Machiavelli is no way to conduct foreign policy.

DIAGNOSIS OF RECIPROCAL RADICALIZATION:

When each party to a feud further entrenches itself in its own dogma, it exacerbates rather than ameliorates division. When the basis of interaction between groups is the pursuit by each of its own tribal agenda, antagonism is inevitable: one tribe's agenda is typically incompatible with another tribe's agenda. Recourse of each group to its own holy book only renders the basis for division more severe. It is only by transcending the basis for division that common purpose may be forged.

The radicals and ideologues on BOTH sides of the Israel-Palestine conflict ruin things for EVERYBODY. Those involved in the Middle East conflict find themselves caught in a downward spiral of reciprocal radicalization (RR). Perpetual mutual antagonism has prevented either side from transcending its own myopic perspective. The more each side digs in its heels and augments its offensive, the more the other side does the same...and so on, in a vicious cycle of mutual vilification.

We've thus ended up with a feud that radicals on BOTH sides exploit for their own aggrandizement. This is especially true for the religious fundamentalists in each camp who garner leverage solely by capitalizing on the fear and insecurity generated by the conflict. They feed off of the resentment on both sides. It should come as no surprise, then, that they intentionally *fuel* the factioning—abetting the hostility off of which their on-going power feeds.

The impresarios of the conflict, then, have no incentive to mitigate the conditions on which their continued leverage depends. A resolution would undermine those conditions. Consequently, they actively encourage anything that perpetuates the RR.

This is the Likud Party in a nutshell; this is Islamist jihadism in a nutshell. One is the analogue of the other. The leaders of each cabal feed off the propaganda *generated by* the conflict—and so are able to thrive *because of* the conflict. In reality, the cabal on each side is the biggest threat to the security of the civilians on its own side. This irony seems to be lost on many who buy into the Siren call of mutual antagonism / mutual vilification.

Iniquitous parties throughout history operate in this way—from Nazis in Germany to INGSOC in Orwell's parable, from right-wing Cold Warriors here in the U.S. to Soviet hardliners in Russia. They MAKE the enemies against which they claim they need to wage war. It is a gimmick as old as the ages.

In this scheme, the rabble is told: There is a menacing "enemy" out there that "threatens" the "security" of the sanctified realm. This way, those in power can point to a justification for consolidating their own power—rationalizing iniquity at every turn. History has shown time and time again that one can get away

with almost anything if one does it in the name of a cause intended to protect an exclusive “us” from a demonized “them”.

The dispute between Israel and Palestine is no exception to this notorious narrative. The RZ GIVES the radicals on the other side every possible reason to resent Israel. Meanwhile, the Islamic jihadists GIVE the RZ ripe opportunities to rationalize the brutal occupation. It is a mutually reinforcing narrative.

The dispute serves as fodder for agit-prop for radicals on both sides. All the while, everyone suffers—*especially those in the weaker group*. Whether one is an Israeli or a Palestinian, the plight of the in-group is useful material for propaganda. Look at RZ propaganda, then at the more extreme propaganda by Hamas, and the template is indistinguishable. Without the plight, the radicals are deprived of grist for their mill.

Radicals, then, have little motivation to resolve the problem in a way that works for EVERYONE. According to their worldview, only the well-being of the in-group matters. Using one’s own dogmatic system to bolster such a sanctimonious approach means that finding common ground is automatically disqualified.

We must stop listening to the radicals. Insofar as we listen to them, we play into their gambit—thus perpetuating the conditions they exploit for their own purposes. The mutual vilification hurts Israelis and Palestinians alike. Insofar as each side becomes radicalized, the incentive to transcend the tribal mindset is suppressed.

ANALYSIS OF A POSITIVE FEEDBACK LOOP:

Some basic sociology is in order here. Elementary social psychology tells us that mutual vilification fuels mutual antagonism...while mutual antagonism fuels mutual vilification...and on and on and on, in perpetuity. It is a self-reinforcing cycle. Because of this, the further radicalization of one party in the dispute engenders the further radicalization of the other party. RR exacerbates the conditions on which the conflict is based.

Anti-goyemism fuels anti-Semitism and vice versa—in a tragic symbiosis of bigotries. A vicious cycle of augmenting tribalism can’t help but ensue from such posturing. The problem is that hubris is incapable of holding a mirror up to itself; it is only willing to see the sins of *the other*. As far as each “side” can see, the other “side” is entirely at fault. According to its own myopic frame, this is the only possible way of interpreting events.

Common ground between the two frames can’t exist. Transcending one’s own dogmatic system is not permitted, thereby precluding any possibility of finding such ground.

The consequence of RR is the present conflict between Israel and Palestine—a conflict couched in the terms set by the radicals on each side. The terms are patently irreconcilable. The approaches proposed by each side are mutually exclusive simply because one is the mirror image of the other. So long as we search for a “solution” in such terms, we’re chasing waterfalls. Incompatible agendas are incompatible precisely because of the terms by which they operate.

Antagonism fuels vilification; and vilification fuels antagonism. The mutual reinforcement ensures each side remains entrenched in its mindset. RR perpetuates the conflict by casting the mode of discussion in the terms set by the radicals on each side: “We’re only fighting for our security; we’ll stop our offensive against them only if they acquiesce to our terms.” A resolution becomes untenable, as—*by definition*—both demands can’t be met.

The use of inflammatory rhetoric buoys the CONDITIONS off of which the conflict feeds. Each “side” engages in the Manichean mentality—wherein it is a “battle” in which either WE win or THEY win. Period.

The chronic obstinacy found on both sides of the argument countenances the narrative offered by the radicals from each side. Is it any wonder, then, that we have a seemingly intractable predicament—an approach in which finding a common cause is rendered off-limits.

RZ and Islamic jihadists: The terms set by each side preclude the possibility of elucidating a shared purpose. But a shared purpose is the *only* way a genuine resolution would be forthcoming. The tragedy is that most Palestinian civilians are NOT Islamic jihadists, and most Israelis do NOT subscribe to RZ. *Radicals on each “side” betray their own people.* It is incumbent on the civilians on each side to denounce their own radicals.

Alas, such a course would require discounting the terms set by radicals—on both sides. Only those willing to engage in a civil discussion based on a common cause—humans dealing with other humans—can resolve the issue. Only then will ALL people involved be able to proceed: innocent civilians treated as innocent civilians, humans from both camps afforded all the rights that every human should be afforded.

The key is to help all parties involved realize this crucial insight. There must be a way to bring to everyone’s attention to the fact that each “side” in this feud—insofar as it sees itself as a “side”—is only further radicalizing the other “side”...thereby exacerbating their own problems. By persisting in this vain, the human community is forgoing any opportunity to set the terms by which all people involved may be treated fairly.

In order to spread this awareness, it’s necessary to expose the delinquency of the respective radical narratives—narratives that only makes sense with respect to one’s own dogmatic system. It must be pointed out that a certain group on each side has a vested interest in perpetuating the conflict—the very circumstance that empowers them. The role of such impresarios must be defused. We can only defuse such a role by IGNORING it. If a Muslim casts his case in tribal terms, he forfeits his right to be part of the process. If someone takes the AIPAC / settler movement line, he forfeits his right to be taken seriously.

We must identify those who benefit from the RR, and evict them from the discussion. Such figures capitalize on the anger and the fear of the common man for their own self-aggrandizement. They prey on insecurity. Demagogues incite mass mania / mass hysteria amongst their respective in-groups, then exploit it to serve their own purposes.

The impresarios pull off this stunt by cultivating neuroses, then fostering false pride. They stoke the resentment, then channel it into further antagonism. RZ do this to promote their own iniquitous agenda. Salafist propagandists do this to rationalize their iniquitous agenda. Everyone else suffers. In both cases, right-wing propaganda resonates with those who are resentful and feel insecure. The impresarios know their target audience. Such crowds are ripe for manipulation.

Maintaining the festering resentment and sustaining the insecurity is the key. The menace of the demonized “other” has always been used by ideologues as fodder for self-styled propaganda. The current Israeli-Palestinian conflict is no exception. As has always been the case with tribal conflicts, false pride is used as a palliative for the fear that is generated. Indeed, false pride seems to ameliorate insecurity—offering a means to vent. For this reason, false pride is a dangerous way to address such a precarious emotional state. The impresarios of RR know this—and milk it for everything they can.

(Why remind the in-group that it's in EVERYONE'S interest to ensure the out-group is treated with respect? That would mean eliminating the justification for the tribal agenda.)

As has been demonstrated over and over again, false pride is a dangerous way to address simmering resentment. For it only encourages the other side to fulfill the appointed role as “enemy” (thus reinforcing the pathology). One side oppresses the other side in the name of its own security, thereby fostering radicalization, thus justifying the oppressive measures...and on and on. The impresarios of the conflict (those who *benefit from* the conflict) know that false pride has an appeal for those who are resentful—for those who feel insecure. That such a hidebound approach sabotages any prospects for reconciliation is not seen as problematic.

The followers imbibe the elixir—they are intoxicated by it. The more one “side” of the feud engages in this approach, the more the other “side” is tempted to engage in it as well. Each side digs in its heels, circles the wagons, and becomes defiant. An impasse can't help but ensue.

There can't be demands for an Ummah and demands for an exclusively Jewish Zion at the same time. Civil society does not function according to such terms. Recourse to any given tribe's holy book can't lead to common ground, as they are—by definition—incompatible. In order for neighbor to co-exist in harmony with neighbor, each must be able to rise above his own tribal visions. Agape demands no less.

Alas, each “side” in the present dispute has not yet managed to accomplish this. Because a mindset is engendered in which WE matter and THEY do not, it doesn't occur to the participants that they are shooting themselves in the foot. In demonizing THE OTHER, they dehumanize those in the out-group...which only encourages the out-group to do the same in return. Calls for retaliation supplant any motive to forge cross-tribal solidarity (to transcend one's own dogmatic system in order to find common ground). *Prospects for a shared project are rendered anathema.*

Bringing all parties to the proverbial “table” requires an understanding of this point: no tribalism allowed. “Mendacity and hubris by either party will not be tolerated. We're all humans here—and must be treated as such.” We must render irrelevant those who think of things in terms of tribal honor. We must eliminate from the discussion those primarily concerned with the glory of the in-group. We must defang those who are focused on vengeance against an entire group for slights incurred from radical elements within. Such things sabotage a viable way forward. And endeavor to cultivate civil society is not a holy war; it is an honest effort to effect social justice for all humans.

When one party to the dispute is heard saying, “But it says here in the Koran that...” while the other party is heard saying, “But it says here in the Torah that...”, a shared vision is untenable. Tribalism is fostered, which precludes any possibility of a shared project between fellow humans. When the member of one tribe looks at the member of another, he sees not their shared humanity, but an adversary—a threat to the fulfillment of a tribal agenda. If he suffers, then so be it.

Such “exceptionalism” renders those not deemed “one of us” a subaltern population, enabling the anointed “good guys” to oppress, persecute, and even kill the designated “bad guys”. The side with more power does this with impunity. The side with less power is forced to suffer—and become further radicalized. The cycle continues. RR becomes a juggernaut.

When people are being shafted yet feel powerless, they resort to drastic measures. Those who are unfairly held down *and lack hope* are prone to rash remedies: this is a universal truth of human behavior. Powerlessness and frustration yield acts of desperation. Venting often holds tremendous appeal for the downtrodden, as has been exhibited by elements of the Palestinian population.

Tragically, the RZ response to this has been horribly counter-productive: “Some of them are hostile foes, so we will continue to beat them down. ALL of them.” Not only is this egregiously unjust, it actually exacerbates the problem it aims to solve. Of course, the impresarios of RZ have no sincere desire to bring justice to all people...so this predicament isn’t seen as problematic.

Contrast this dysfunctional approach with Humanitarian Zionism (HZ). “Only by helping EVERYONE can all of us be secure,” says the HZ. The U.S. and the IG should be building schools and hospitals in Palestine, not viciously oppressing them, killing them, and stealing their land—thereby stoking the very resentment that precipitates the hostility. As Ron Suskind noted in his *The Way Of The World*, “America’s long-term security relies on being viewed not as a threat but as a source of opportunity and hope.” The same goes for the IG vis a vis Palestine.

Probity, not militancy, paves the way forward. Compassion, not guns, is the key to getting Palestinians and Israelis to live side-by-side, as neighbors, in a human community. We could call this, “Zion for mankind”.

CONCLUSION:

To extricate itself from this self-defeating condition, each party in the conflict must resist the temptations to indulge in false pride. Each side must overcome the trappings of tribalism, and transcend its own myopic worldview. *Common ground only exists on meta-tribal terms.* This requires recognizing that “we’re all in this together”, that “we must embrace our shared humanity.” In other words, “We must cease casting everything in terms of *us vs. them.*” When a Palestinian looks at an Israeli, or an Israeli looks at a Palestinian, he must see—above and beyond all else—a fellow human.

The onus is on the party with the greater power to cease and desist first. After all, there is only one party that is being viciously oppressed, persecuted, and occupied. The power asymmetry in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is gargantuan. It is, then, quite obvious what the first step must be, and who must take it. There is no “chicken or the egg” dilemma here.

Meanwhile, it is imperative that everyone involved denounce both anti-Semitism and anti-goyem-ism. We must consistently be against ALL forms of racism. The anti-Semitism endemic to Islamic radicals and the anti-goyem-ism endemic to RZ must be called out for what they are: racism. NEITHER perspective should be given attention—neither approach tolerated. Both are unacceptable *for the same reasons.*

Unless we are constitutionally against bigotry in all of its manifestations, we engage in hypocrisy—thereby perpetuating the dysfunction responsible for the feud. So long as this dysfunction is allowed to persist, we prolong the dilemmas with which we’re confronted. There is no subaltern population. EVERY human involved matters, no matter the ethnic identity. Period.

The way forward, then, is to formulate a HUMANITARIAN version of Zionism—one that embraces the value of every human qua human, regardless of tribal affiliations. HZ is predicated on the recognition that ALL humans matter. It proceeds from the axiom that the suffering of a Palestinian is just as tragic and unacceptable as the suffering of an Israeli—and vice versa.

HZ is predicated on the proposition that every human has a categorical right to be treated with dignity—that every human is to be afforded all the rights attendant to BEING A HUMAN. This means that Palestinians and Israelis alike are categorically entitled to access to potable water, to freedom of

movement, to commercial pursuits, to basic security, and to credible assurance of permanent safety. Anyone who can't recognize such basic principles has forfeited his right to be taken seriously—whether RZ or Islamist jihadist. Until one party can look at the other party—first and foremost—as *fellow humans*, both parties are doomed to a self-imposed stalemate.

We can't talk about Israeli security without talking about Palestinian security. We can't talk about Palestinian rights without talking about Israeli rights. Palestinians and Israelis BOTH have the right to not suffer. Palestinians have as much of a right to a high quality education and to high quality healthcare as Israelis. Denying such things to one group in the name of the "security" of the other group is a non-starter.

Universal access to such things MUST be ensured—regardless of tribal affiliation. To deprive one group of people of access to such things is to create an incubator for divisiveness and resentment...thereby setting the stage for conflict. Injustice breeds radicalization. Oppressed / persecuted people are much more prone to become radicalized—as desperation fosters drastic measures. Want to stop radicalization? Stop the oppression.

Both sides must openly recognize that there is no uniquely privileged group of people. Jews and goyim are on the same ground: the ground of humanity. Currently, this is a fundamental truth that radicals on both sides of the conflict obstinately refuse to recognize. They thereby create the conditions by which the conflict can't be stopped.

Advocating HZ means never allowing ANY group to oppress or persecute any other group in the name of its own interests. It entails never indicting an entire people for the crimes of a few deviants. It means never attacking a whole group because of the transgression of some of its members. It says to never hold the iniquities of a delimited segment against an entire population of civilians.

What may help all people endorse the tenets of HZ is Kant's Categorical Imperative. In brief: Act only on a principle that you would at the same time insist that everyone else in the world based THEIR actions on. Never treat another human being as a means to your own ends only, but always as an end in himself. This requires one to embrace universal principles—to transcend one's own interests (and the dogmatic system to which one may be wed). This is what Marx meant by "species being". It is what Spinoza urged in his *Ethics*.

What may help everyone implement such an approach is to see the situation from Rawls' Original Position (i.e. through what he dubbed "a veil of ignorance"). In this way, each party will be able to transcend the self-involved perspective that prevents it from doing what is necessary to help ALL humans.

RECOMMENDED READING:

For a basic conceptual framework, see Anthony Appiah's *The Ethics of Identity* and Amartya Sen's *The Idea of Justice*. (*Equality & Liberty* by Kai Nielson is also very insightful.)

For thoughts that inspired my treatment of RR, see the introduction to Chris Hedges' *War Is A Force That Gives Us Meaning*. For an analysis of the psychological causes of conflict, see Scheff's *Bloody Revenge*.

For an explanation of the Rawlsian paradigm, see Rawls' classic, *A Theory of Justice*. For applications to transnational relations, see his *The Law of Peoples*.

For an explanation of the Categorical Imperative, see Kant's *Groundwork Of The Metaphysics of Morals* (especially the analysis and explication by H.J. Paton). Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* is also instructive. Both works are short and accessible.

For those of Jewish ethnicity who have trouble thinking of things in terms other than that of their ethnic identity, see the ethical writings of the greatest Jewish thinker in history, Baruch Spinoza. Also a must-read: Marx's essay, *On The Jewish Question*. For a meta-religious ethical framework, see Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* and *Age of Reason*. All of the above works are also helpful for those Muslims who have difficulty thinking in meta-Islamic / non-dogmatic terms.