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The barriers approach to the Palestinian-Israeli peace process

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Social conflict is constantly changing in scope, dynamics and pattern. Clashes between nation-states become obsolete while internal rifts within sovereign entities escalate rapidly to local and regional strife. The changing nature of disputes around the world stimulates new emphases and foci in conflict research. One of the novel shifts of interests is why conflicts endure and linger, or what prevents antagonists from terminating their contention even if they are both better off without it. The paper introduces the barriers approach to conflict resolution by grappling with the question of what the impediments to conflict termination are. The perspective is investigated in the context of one of the most protracted and deep-rooted conflicts in the world today: the Palestinian-Israeli, which despite occasional breakthroughs remains substantially entangled in the woes of hostility, violence and despair.

Key words: Conflict theory, conflict resolution, barriers approach.

INTRODUCTION

Intrinsic changes in the character of the social and political conflicts happen all over the world. These developments fail to be properly explained because research is still trapped within the neat and parsimonious paradigm of “government versus people” or “incumbents versus challengers” (Gurr, 1970; Oberschall, 1973; Tilly, 1978) in attempting to explain conflict and violence. But who are those people who rebel? How are they organized? What are their motivation and stimulation? Imperative questions to grapple with are who initiates political conflicts, who enkindles them, when and how are they enkindled. In short, who are the agents of socio-political change and what makes them tick. Accurate identification of the proponents may illuminate new ways to understand and cope with conflict.

This paper highlights a certain operative mode of socio-political conflicts, in which the participants are not merely governments and some vague elements that violate social codes but specific organized non-governmental actors, in particular revitalized identity groups. These groups are tenacious and ambitious because they represent real grievances, real constituencies and unresolved problems mistreated or ignored by the establishment. Characterized by their defiance of political norms and rules of the game, such groups dramatically influence the course and intensity of domestic conflict. In order to

establish themselves as worthy opponents to the mechanisms of government and social control, revitalized identity groups must invest in mobilization, solidarity and group cohesion processes. On both sides of the Palestinian-Israeli division, there are such actors and every attempt at resolving the conflict must take heed of them.

The re-examination of the dynamics of conflict undermines the general concept, which determines that political conflicts are fought between formal groups and within normal political confines. These traditional accounts fail to consider the identity groups, who dispute the state's authority in their search for the fulfillment of their aspirations. The conflicting interests between identity groups and the state, as well as a deep antagonism amongst competing identity group's, causes and incites protracted conflicts, which are most difficult to resolve. Owing to their complex nature, these conflicts have a tendency to deteriorate into violence, and in extreme circumstances, even to terrorism. The escalation of the conflict is motivated by a collision between the state's authority and the authority of the identity group. The shape, pace and timing of the escalation depend on the balance of power between the two sides (Gurr, 1993). But in order to properly assess the contribution of an identity group research perspective, it is pertinent to peruse

the premises of conflict theory. Once these new emphases of the conflict phenomenon are highlighted, then novel approaches to conflict resolution can also be adopted. One such approach which is advanced here is the barriers approach, which focuses on the hindrances on the road to settlement and termination of conflict. Finally, with regard to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, a major shift of attention is suggested from "tangible" issues of security, borders and economics to the "intangible" topics of religion and culture. This is where the genuine incompatibility between the two parties exists and hampers any progress and successful culmination of the dispute.

CLASSICAL THEORIES OF CONFLICT

The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences has depicted conflict as "the substance of politics" (Fox and Fox, 1968). Indeed, conflict is ubiquitous and central to history and human development. As a recurring phenomenon invoking tension, struggle, and possibly violence and change, conflict is also a focus of interest in global politics. Consequently, the study of world affairs must emphasize the analysis and understanding of conflict. Its prominence affirms using the study of conflict as an acid test for the burgeoning identity group perspective. If the theory supplies a superior account of world politics by supplementing existing explanations with new ones, then the Lakatosian criterion of a new inquiry perspective is met (Lakatos and Musgrave, 1970).

The growing recognition of the importance and vitality of conflict studies has long been expressed in the commendable endeavor to concentrate research approaches and combine various levels of social conflict under the same interdisciplinary roof. Instead of investigating disparate conflicts in their respective surroundings, the new thrust among conflict scholars during the 1950's and 1960's was that social conflict had a sufficient number of common attributes to merit its study as a distinct field, albeit with diverse applications. Such unity of research posits conflict as the main axis of political interactions. It considers politics a shifting combination of conflict and co-operation, which constantly supplant one another. Whether it is the realist vision of a perpetual quest for hegemony and a pervasive 'security dilemma' (Gilpin, 1981), or whether it is human rights approach that sees international relations as "the processes of legitimization and delegitimization" (Coate and Rosati, 1988:13), conflict is at the center of politics.

Although conflict is a topic that "has occupied the thinking of man more than any other, save only God and love" (Rapoport, 1960:12), the mere excitement it elicits, and the fact that it generates examinations, bibliographies, courses, and journals (Boulding, in Schellenberg, 1982: 5) does not yet render the study of conflict a cohesive discipline. There is a need for a solid and convincing

rationale to cement it together across the multiple arenas in which conflict unfolds. Existing theories present conflict as an endemic feature of social interactions, and thus it is bound to appear in interpersonal as well as inter-state relations. The identity group approach adds the notion of human needs as undergirding many possible conflicts. In the following section, some of the common perspectives on conflict, as well as the definitions and approaches mentioned in the existing theories, are presented along with their weaknesses. Later, they are contrasted with the views of identity group approach on conflict. The new elements that make up the difference in perspective are employed as a springboard for describing the motivation and ideology as conflict facilitators.

The prevalent assumption among conflict researchers is that conflict is ever-present, inevitable, and necessary. There are various arguments for which Mack (1965:394) submits that conflict is a natural feature of society because "social organizations are characterized by both contact among members and competition for scarce positions and resources". Others simply call attention to the fact that conflict is inherent in any human association and cannot be removed.

Social conflict is a likely guest wherever human beings set up forms of social organizations. It would be difficult to conceive the idea of an ongoing society where social conflict is absent. The society without conflict is a dead society.....like it or not, conflict is a reality of human existence (Lee, 1964:3)

Some scholars believe not only that conflict is unavoidable, but that it is indispensable and valuable to both individual and to society as a whole. Nieburg (1969:16) observes that violence generated out of conflict can be useful as a bargaining strategy, and as a demonstration of the serious dissatisfaction the aggrieved party faces. As such, conflict invigorates society, prevents cleavages from being neglected, and becomes "an essential aspect of growth". Frank (1962:193) concurs by granting that conflict "gives life much of its meaning, so that its elimination, even if attainable, would not be desirable". Boulding (1962:305) plainly points out that conflict adds excitement and thrill, and in certain situation it "lends to life a certain dramatic interest."

Exponents of democracy extol conflict as one of the premises of the free society. Lipset (1963:71) asserts that the "existence of a moderate state of conflict [is] another way of defining a legitimate democracy", while Schattschneider (1960:64) observes that "[t]here are billions of potential conflicts in any modern society" and that "a democratic society is able to survive because it manages conflict by establishing priorities among a multitude of potential conflicts".

The classic tradition of politics saw conflict as destructive and dangerous. It was usually perceived as an aberration, an anomalous phenomenon on the margins of society, which should be eradicated for the benefit of all (Almond and Powell, 1966: 172-173). The consolidation

of conflict research into a distinct field necessitates the exoneration of conflict and its transfer from the fringes of politics to the mainstream, from an anomaly to common place. Thus, a popular trend of writing, mainly among sociologists and psychologists, centers on the functions of conflict and its contribution for the group cohesion and the morale of the individual.

Both Coser (1956) and Williams (1975) have analyzed the cross-cutting cleavages situation, or a society with several conflicts which balance each other, rather than the single, rigid conflict which tears society in two. Coser (1956, pp. 39-40) elaborates on the sense of unity and identity conflict promotes in the group. Moreover, conflict can be used as a pressure valve by making it possible for individuals to "let off steam," thereby reducing strain in situations of high volatility. Conflict allows for expression of tension rather than suppressing it to the point of explosion; thus the structure of the group is preserved.

Morton Deutsch (1969:7) is another exponent of the constructive possibilities of conflict. It seems plausible to him that conflict's "very pervasiveness suggests that it has many positive functions" such as being a medium for problems to be discussed; delineating groups from one another, thereby enhancing unique identities; and fostering personal and social change. Mack and Snyder generally sustain the notion of the functionality of conflict. They adopt many of Coser's (1957:228) propositions, though they warn that:

As a crude first approximation to a meaningful distinction, it might be suggested that conflicts, on balance, dysfunctional to the extent that its positive functions are impaired or neutralized under certain conditions.

These new outlooks on the nature of conflict and the motivation of its participants usher in a new understanding of conflict resolution as well. This unconventional view of conflict resolution advocates the barriers analysis and the shift from strategic-economic concerns to moral-ethical considerations of religion and culture at the heart of the negotiation process. But before we continue to explore this shift, another issue should be probed: why is it so difficult and complicated to obtain a transformation from conflict to conflict resolution? Why are most people, groups and nations more preoccupied with the former rather than the latter?

TRANSITION FROM CONFLICT TO CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Conflict and its resolution are symmetric processes or rather mirror images of one another. Thus the trail we have been following to comprehend the phenomenon of conflict will be marched again but backwards. If the last layer in the definition of conflict was choice, in the road to understand conflict resolution this is the first stop. In order to shift from conflict to resolution, the contenders

must decide that they have exhausted the contentious option and that it is time to seek an agreed solution. This has to be a cognitive and conscious conclusion of all parties involved. If it is an enforced pressure from outside to terminate the conflict and switch to negotiations and some actors are still reluctant or half-hearted about it, the process would run into difficulties very soon after. The point of departure therefore, from belligerency to settlement is the sentient determination that the option we engaged so far was unsatisfactory and it does not bring us closer to our goal whereas resolving the dispute is preferable. But between the recognition that this is the right option and its actual implementation lies a large distance laden with pitfalls- psychological, strategic and political, which hamper what looks like a pretty obvious and simple step: ending an inefficient and fruitless contention, shorten suffering and waist and set out on a new phase, improved and beneficial to all.

The first snag on the road to resolution can be termed the "who-blinks-first" dilemma. This difficulty can be characterized as follows: even if the rivals are at their lowest ebb and they are absolutely cognizant of the fact that conflicts leads them nowhere, neither is ready to budge fearing that such a move would be interpreted by the other as a sign of weakness. In a conflict mindset the temptation to win relentlessly prowls. Each wave of a white flag signals surrender and admission of defeat. The opponent, even if equally devastated and hopeless, would cling on to such indication as a miraculous opening for a possible victory after all. This zeal to persist and conquest is urged by the need to convalesce and restore one's investment and sacrifices in a protracted campaign of attrition. Hence, every glimpse of capitulation from the other side, any blink of submission generates hope in the non-blinking side for an approaching triumph. Since the fear of blinking is mutual, and the concern that such gesture would only augment the rival's tenacity, both parties are reluctant to initiate and despite their common misery they remain locked in an ongoing predicament they share. This is a tragic absurd whereby all sides realize they would be better off ceasing hostilities but yet they all knowingly prefer to loiter. The only way out of this irrational paralysis is if all parties simultaneously proclaim their intention to terminate the contentious interaction and embark on a new path of reconciliation and dialogue. Only one quality is able to guarantee the success of such a plan and it is the one which is most absent during conflict, the precious trait of mutual trust.

A striking example of such grand-scale folly is World War I. When it broke out on August 4th, 1914, it was perceived by many as glorious and romantic and masses of European soldiers answered the call to arms with enthusiastic fervor. They all believed that it would be a brief and heroic encounter of punishing an impudent rival culminating in a victory parade, a chance to be decorated and then a rapid return to routine life. Excluding a meager number of 'professional' ill-wishers that predicted a long

war, most people were convinced that they would be back home by Christmas to celebrate with their families. These aspirations faded away very quickly once the war started and the initial chivalric gusto was replaced by mounting anxiety and gloom. In late autumn, only a few months into the fighting, the French and German forces were already dug up and entrenched facing one another along the infamous Maginot Line. This formidable sequence of concrete fortifications, called after the French Minister of Defense who designed it, stretched from Lorraine at the southern portion of the French-German border to the Belgian coast and split Northern Europe in half. The two massive camps pitted along this line without making any significant advance for four years. Even though it was clear to everyone involved that the conflict has become futile and unworthy, nobody dared blinking first.

Another attribute in addition to the ambition to win, which cripples the transition to conflict resolution, is the yearning to be just and vindicating. The transition to reconciliation is inhibited by the concern that departure from struggle really means abandoning the belief that you are right. Resoluteness and insistence during conflict is widely perceived as a demonstration of one's 'truthfulness' and integrity while folding symbolizes, according to this logic, lack of self confidence and a deficient degree of rectitude. One of the highest peaks in Tolstoy's (1828 - 1910) monumental book "War and Peace" describes the battle of Borodino on September 7th, 1812. It lasted only one day but became the largest and bloodiest of all the Napoleonic wars. More than 250,000 soldiers fought there and about 70,000 died. Borodino became a breaking point in the war and a key to the demise of the French Emperor. It was the last charge of Napoleon and Tolstoy focuses on Mikhail Kutuzov, the revered Russian general, who thought to surrender in the face of the preponderant French Grande Armee. Against his good judgment and the recommendation of the Russian military High Command, he was forced by Tsar Alexander to persevere in order to uphold the Russian justified cause. He and his soldiers bravely held up until they were overpowered and the road to Moscow was opened for Napoleon (Tolstoy, 1976).

Another inhibitor is the desire to revenge. The quest for vengeance is a powerful motivator to launch a conflict and to maintain it even when it is not successful. The French nurtured their lust to avenge the Germans for forty years, carrying their humiliation from the overwhelming crush by Bismarck in the 1870 - 1871 wars to the First World War in 1914. Their eagerness for revanche was the central drive behind the mortifying conditions imposed on Germany by French Prime-Minister Clemenceau in the Treaty of Versailles. Blind urge for reprisal is never a prudent counselor and in this case, France's attitude was certainly one of the main accelerators toward WWII. Unfortunately, this destructive force of revenge is very rampant in human history.

Homer, the Athenian poet of the eighth century BC recounts the sad tale of Troy in his epos "The Iliad", and there again, the main motivation behind the assault of mighty Athens on Troy is King Menelaus of Sparta's willingness to avenge the abduction of his wife Helen by Prince Paris of Troy.

All these hurdles accruing on the path of transferring from conflict to its resolution - the temptation to win, the urge to be just and the desire to revenge - can be curbed or at least tamed by communication between the belligerent sides. If the rivaling parties would expound their intentions to one another and reveal their concerns and sentiments, they would be able to realize that the non-compromising nature of victory, justice and revenge steers them in the opposite direction and toward a long and cumbersome conflict. The unconditional pursuit of justice in the context of dispute is always at the expense of another and this quest invokes the requirements of achievement and payback in a typical zero-sum framework: mine before his. The barriers approach may facilitate coping with these traditional difficulties of shifting from a collision course to collaboration. It is time to get acquainted with barriers analysis and the cultural-religious approach to conflict resolution. For starters, the general shift of emphasis within the field of conflict resolution is pointed out.

DEVELOPMENTS IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Traditional conflict resolution tended to be concentrated, rational and normative. It focused on the conflict itself, striving to mediate between the rivaling sides toward a non violent agreement. It was characteristically rational, gauging the pros and cons of each side and recommending priorities and alternative scenarios. It was ultimately normative by pointing out that negotiation processes should always aspire for a problem-solving strategy that would transform the interaction between the parties from a zero-sum game to a win-win situation. It was firm and absolute in this judgment: this is the best way under any circumstance. In addition, conflict resolution was consistently perceived as external to the dispute: administered by a third party, either as a facilitator, mediator or arbitrator; an outside intervention was deemed imperative. This was mainly attributed to the destructive communication patterns among the directly involved actors and the mistrust that dominated their relationships.

New developments in the field of conflict resolution since the 1990's have changed the traditional wisdom in meaningful ways. The transformation was instigated as an intellectual reaction to the sweeping changes in the world such as the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, the Iranian revolution and the rise of radical Islam and the spread of ravishing internal wars in the Balkans and Africa. The new understanding was

expressed in three major themes:

1) Conflict resolution became contingent rather than normative and absolute: problem-solving might not be appropriate for every disagreement and in any stage of the negotiation process. Different phases of the conflict require disparate conflict resolution strategies (Fisher and Keashly, 1991; Lederach, 1997; Ramsbotham and Woodhouse, 1999).

2) Classic conflict resolution focused on the dispute itself, concentrating efforts to enter the confrontation, separate the belligerents and channel their disagreement to non violent paths. Contemporary conflict resolution chooses a broader perspective on the conflict, trying to comprehend the background, motivations, interests and objectives of each side, or in short, underlying the environment of conflict and contextualizing it (Burton, 1990; Kriesberg, 1998; Wallenstein, 2002).

3) While traditional conflict resolution emphasizes the external intervention by capable third parties, the new approaches highlight the internal forces on each side that can promote and uphold conflict resolution from within. Such internal processes tend to attain a change of attitude toward the other. It can be achieved through uninvolved parties gradually becoming core parties (Encarnacion et al., 1990) or through a bottom-up process whereby grass-root movements promulgate messages of peace by non violent collective behavior (Tarrow, 1999; Zunes et al., 1999). A third way is a top-bottom process in which elites inspire and motivate masses to follow their lead (Lederach, 1997; Ramsbotham et al., 2006).

This paper introduces the new understanding of conflict resolution and it reflects the above shifts of emphasis. It relates to conflict resolution as contingent and complementary, that is, - that conflict experiences divergent stages and in each one different strategies are employed. A broader perspective is adopted to probe and analyze conflict, taking under consideration structural and cultural determinants. Finally, an internal approach is presented by hypothesizing that framed texts can influence perceptions of readers. If the hypotheses are substantiated than they could be used to find a 'winning formula' or frame to dissuade people from violence and direct them toward peaceful behavior. Such findings will contribute to the arduous peace-building endeavor - the most delicate of all prevention and post-conflict stages.

THE BARRIERS APPROACH

An interesting anomaly in the research of conflict resolution is the paucity of successful agreements to remove a quarrel. This puzzle is even more conspicuous in cases where all sides know that they would benefit from an agreement and that they would be better off after a treaty than without signing one at all. The question then

becomes what hinders the peaceful termination of conflicts? Such an inquiry necessitates a shift of focus from studying interests and motivations of belligerents or phases and dynamics of the dispute process to what stands between rivals, or in short, focusing on barriers to conflict resolution (Arrow et al., 1995).

Barriers to a successful negotiation can be clustered into three categories: structural, tactical/strategic and psychological. They are not mutually exclusive and can overlap in certain instances. Each category deserves some elaboration as thus discussed.

Structural barriers

These are barriers, which denote organizational, institutional, and bureaucratic restrictions that cripple the parties' ability to communicate with each other. A debilitating pattern of interaction follows whereby the exchange of information is lacking and misinterpretation develops with regard to priorities, sensitivities and schedule. In many cases, peripheral interests overshadow the concerns of the majority or powerful elites' disguise their own agenda as the general public's agenda. Bureaucratic politics also play a role here as they encourage narrow and parochial considerations over broader and longer-term ones. A barrier in many conflicts is the fact that the necessary compromises and concessions must be made sequentially rather than simultaneously, so that one side has to "go first", with no certainty that the other side will follow suit (Bland and Ross, 2008).

Tactical and strategic barriers

The second category of barriers represents the logic of the negotiation process, or at least, its image in contemporary politics. Compromise is commonly perceived as the most reasonable outcome of negotiation. Under this conviction, the parties to the conflict endeavor to be intransigent, maximalist and non-cooperative at the initial stages in order to establish a good position when compromise arrives. Such unyielding tactics are intensified through secrecy, deception, bluffing, stalling, and other rough tactics which disable trust and derail collaboration. Any openness and flexibility might be interpreted as a sign of weakness.

Psychological barriers

The third category of barriers represents normative, ethical and moral inhibitions that are rooted in our cognitive system. They are composed of beliefs, associations, references, generalizations and analogies that portray collective negative images of the other.

These are sustained by stigmata, framing processes

and labels designed to denigrate and vilify enemies. Such thinking obscures reality and creates a black-and-white vision. The implications are phenomena like false polarization or the underestimation of common ground, pursuit of equity or justice, dissonance reduction and avoidance, biased assimilation of relevant information, judgmental overconfidence, loss aversion, and reactive devaluation—the tendency to belittle potential agreements especially when offered by one's rival (Bland and Ross, 2008).

FOUR PRAGMATIC QUESTIONS

To fully grasp the potency of these barriers and to be able to confront them, four questions must be presented to prospective peace delegates. These are four essential issues to be considered by both sides before talks begin and before the actual bones of contention are put on the table. If the problems the questions expose are keenly encountered and systematically dealt with, they bear the potential of overcoming the barriers and set conflict resolution on a fruitful track.

The question of a shared future

Can the parties to the conflict agree on a futuristic scenario that would be bearable for both? (Bland and Ross, 2008). If such a consent cannot be reached, no agreement will be feasible. Such a vision of shared future does not have to be identical, and indeed, with the two sides having different priorities and disparate goals, it cannot be. However, as long as each side can count on the other to ensure tolerable life after an agreement is signed, a shared future is possible.

The question of trustworthiness

A second question follows directly from the shared future question. Can the guarantees of the parties be trusted? The issue of trust pertains not only to the endgame result but also to each step along the way, the intermediate phases which ought to be culminated by the final agreement. The history of their past relationship, the scars of the protracted conflict and the strategic nature of negotiation posit trustworthiness as a major criterion for the success of conflict resolution.

The question of loss acceptance

Every conflict resolution entails a sense of loss and missed opportunities. Psychologically and regardless of the relative achievements of each side, everyone feels he got a raw deal. Then the question becomes how to absorb losses that one's constituency will find very

humiliating and degrading? The imminent gap between the aspired results of a negotiated agreement and the actual results creates a formidable sense of loss. Prospective losses always eclipse prospective gains, thus raising objections against the validity of the agreement. The challenge of getting the parties to accept their losses is a difficult one but necessary nevertheless because without it, a peace agreement will not prevail.

The question of justice

Every party to conflict always boasts the claim of justice. The decision to initiate a conflict or to join one appears more noble and worthwhile if it is embellished with the cause of justice. However, since justice is an ambivalent and a highly slippery term, finding an interpretation that suits both sides' understanding of the word is futile. Thus, Bland and Ross' recommendation is very prudent in this regard: "Perhaps the more modest goal of reducing injustice generally proves to be less problematic. People of goodwill who cannot agree about the requirements of justice can often recognize suffering that is undeserved and unjust, and can agree on provisions to reduce such suffering." (Bland and Ross, 2008). Insisting on justice before agreement may very well indicate that the claimant of justice does not really want peace at the present time.

TWO CAVEATS AND A FINAL POINT

My final and most vital point: treating conflict resolution as merely a matter of realigning or reconciling interests in search of "win-win" advances over the status quo is futile and counterproductive. In the Palestinian-Israeli case, conflict resolution has been too rational and too tangible: security, borders, refugees, Jerusalem, water, land. The intangibles: spiritual, religious and cultural matters never seriously considered and that is a grave omission.

However, before this lacuna can be seriously grappled with, two caveats must be mentioned: a) can two contending communities of two distinct faiths manage a dispute between them without religious tolerance toward each other? And b) what is the role and responsibility of spiritual leadership in steering their communities toward a religiously motivated conflict termination? These are certainly pertinent issues if a new and updated perspective on the Middle East strife is adopted and they are worthy of elaboration in a follow up article. At this point it would suffice to underline that tolerance, indeed respect and caring for the other's beliefs, creeds, customs and ceremonies are essential to pursue any interfaith dialogue. Moreover, they are for all intents and purposes a precondition for such an engagement.

Scholars of religious conflict resolution have stressed the crucial importance of Jews and Arabs reading

scriptures together, attending each other's feasts and rituals, and sharing mourning and celebrations (Appleby, 2000; Gopin, 2000). Such an interaction naturally brings forth the imperative role of religious leaders, the influential men of words (Hoffer J, 2002). Both in Israel and among the Palestinians, Rabbi Ovadia Yossef, the former chief Sephardic Rabbi and the founder of Shas, the most powerful religious political party, and Sheikh Taissir Tamimi the Chief Islamic judge of the Palestinian National Authority carry more weight than prime ministers. A word from them for or against peace negotiations can launch or derail the entire process. Their contribution cannot be ignored. Religious leaders must be included as senior members in every delegation for peace and reconciliation talks.

This is not merely a procedural item or a peace process 'face-lifting'. Religious issues and the role of religious leaders is significant on psychological, moral and substantial levels. Considering religious leaders as prime players in conflict termination demonstrates dignity and acceptance toward the other side's priorities and sensitivities, a major step toward easing tensions with former foes. These issues and the role of religious leaders in the transition to peaceful coexistence cannot be overlooked. It will produce several outcomes of enduring significance: clarification of the differences and similarities among the theological positions that might affect the peace process in the future; a network of personal relationships among religious leaders that will help to enhance the continuing dialogue on these issues in future discussions; and concrete proposals for the role of religion and religious leaders in scenarios for peaceful co-existence between Israelis and Palestinians.

The conflict in the Middle East has become a focal point of world attention and it disturbs global peace and stability more than any other dispute of our time. The Palestinian-Israeli strife originated as a national disagreement between two national movements - Jewish and Arab - confronted each other. Initially culture and religion were not major components of the quarrel between the two sides, which was largely over control of territory and political authority. But increasingly, on both sides, religious issues have been part of the problem. For this reason, religion also has to be part of the solution.

In the last twenty years, religion, with its formidable power to elicit loyalty, commitment and willingness to sacrifice, became a key factor in the endurance and survival of this conflict. Despite the prominent role of religion in enhancing and sustaining the protracted conflict, however, it was never seriously mentioned in mediation attempts between the rivaling parties. It was virtually neglected in the Camp David accords, the Oslo accords, the Wye River agreement, and the Annapolis negotiations. In the various rounds of negotiation and reconciliation, political, economic, military, industrial, and even agricultural issues were included, but religion was seldom considered. In most cases, religious issues were either deemed unimportant or too difficult to discuss.

A root treatment of the ongoing strife that has plagued the region for many years relates to issues of religion and spirituality. Among the critical issues are matters such as the theology of land, the concepts of sacred space, the role of religion and religious leaders in public life, the notion of faith-based national communities, and the relation between secular law and religious law. These issues are vital to the possibilities of mutual toleration and coexistence. Instead of eschewing them, discussions about the role of faith should be at the fore as a bridge and hope for a better future.

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