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Muslims and Jews: Common Ground

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By Robert Eisen
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It's been often noted that a key reason for the intractability of the conflict between Jews and Muslims in the Middle East is that both sides operate with a mutually exclusive set of assumptions about the history of the dispute.

Jews view the state of Israel as the triumph of a dispossessed people who waited 2,000 years for a return to their homeland. If violence has accompanied that return, it is solely because of Arab intransigence; Jews were willing to settle peacefully among their Arab neighbors, but the latter were hostile to a sovereign Jewish entity in the Middle East and declared war against it from its inception.

Muslims view the state of Israel as the most egregious example of Western colonialism and imperialism, a foreign body inserted into the Middle East for the purpose of furthering Western domination. Any violence is solely the fault of the Jews and their Western allies. The Jews were able to take possession of the land by violently displacing its inhabitants, and they have succeeded in holding on to it with the help of Western military support.

What has been lost is the fact that both Jews and Muslims

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have a great deal in common in the way they perceive their respective histories. Each community has an understanding of its history that is much broader than that defined by this conflict, and we gain much insight into the nature of the dispute by comprehending those larger frameworks.

First the Jewish side. To understand modern Jews and their attachment to Israel, one has to remember that the Jewish people have been around for 3,000 years and that for the majority of that time they have been ruled by foreign powers that have often persecuted them. In biblical times Jews were dominated by a series of empires, and their kingdom was destroyed twice. In the Middle Ages they lived in Christian lands and were frequently subjected to violence.

In Muslim countries, Jews were treated much better -- as a protected minority. But they were never equal to Muslims, and medieval Jewish literature often expresses feelings of humiliation because of Jews' lack of power in Muslim lands. And even there, Jews sometimes experienced violence.

The ultimate violence, of course, came in 20th-century Europe with the Holocaust. Jews created the state of Israel in the belief that they would finally be able to live in security and dignity. It is a project that has succeeded only in part. Certainly, Jews now have sovereignty in their ancient homeland, as well as a powerful army. But Israel is surrounded by tens of millions of Muslims, many of whom oppose its existence. One must keep in mind that there are only 14 million Jews in the world, and almost half of them live in Israel.

One might argue, then, that the creation of Israel has actually made the Jews less secure. The fear now is not just violence but annihilation. Much of this helps explain why Israelis deal so harshly with their Palestinian adversaries. Jews are sensitive to every provocation that threatens Israel because of their history of vulnerability. They will perceive Palestinians as a threat as long as they commit acts of violence against Israelis and refuse to recognize Israel's legitimacy -- even if Palestinians don't have an army. Every Palestinian teenager lifting a stone to throw at an Israeli soldier will be viewed by Jews, in light of their bloody history, as a threat. I should emphasize that what matters here is Jewish perceptions of reality, not necessarily the reality itself, because it is perceptions that cause people to act regardless of what the reality is.

Turning to the Muslim side, we see a strikingly similar pattern. Muslim identity in the modern period has also been shaped by the bitter experience of foreign domination and humiliation. For the past 200 years, the Muslim world has been victimized by Western

colonialism and imperialism. Many Muslim countries eventually have won their independence, but the power of oil has kept the West deeply involved in the Middle East. The advent of the state of Israel has been understood by the Muslim world as a symptom of the continuing Western attempt to dominate it.

Just as with the Jews, Muslims have turned to violence because they see it as the only way to defend themselves. In the absence of military power, some Muslims have resorted to terrorism as the only avenue to independence. Here, too, perceptions have made it difficult to differentiate between different types of threats. American peacemakers who travel to Iraq are being killed alongside American soldiers. Again, it is the perceptions that count, not necessarily the reality.

Getting each side to acknowledge the perceptions of the other, let alone sympathize with them, is no easy task. Some Muslims I have spoken to balk at the notion that Jews or Israelis feel vulnerable and argue that any suggestion to this effect is manipulative and designed to evoke sympathy: After all, Israel has a powerful army and Jews are highly influential everywhere in the world. Some of my Jewish friends are equally discomfited by my analysis. They object to any equation of Jewish suffering with Muslim suffering, because the Muslim world has never experienced the kind of persecution the Jews have.

What both sides miss here is the critical point that, again, what count are perceptions. Each side genuinely feels its vulnerability and humiliation and sees the other side as more powerful, and that is all that matters. After all, it is those perceptions that motivate each side to kill. Yet there may be hope for dialogue on the basis of these perceptions. I have shared the arguments outlined here between Jews and Muslims, and some have been intrigued by the parallel between their histories -- particularly Shiite Muslims, whose sense of humiliation at the hands of West has been compounded by the humiliation they have experienced from the Sunni Muslim majority throughout their history. In this regard they share a great deal with Jews.

Another point: The ones who respond most positively to my thinking are Muslim clerics. In my experience with interreligious dialogue in the past few years, it has become clear to me that clergy are far better than the politicians at baring their souls and sharing their emotions when talking with their enemies. They are therefore more likely to discuss the fears and insecurities motivating their respective communities to violence.

What this suggests to me is that it's time the clergy be given a more central role in the peace process between Jews and Muslims. For

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decades politicians on both sides have argued over where to draw borders but have brought us no closer to peace. The clergy have been excluded from such negotiations because of the perception that religion is the problem, not the solution. Yet so much of the conflict between Jews and Muslims has been tied to religion that it's hard to imagine a settlement without the clerics. Perhaps with their help, Jews and Muslims can address the real issues between them so that a new relationship can emerge.

The writer is a professor of religion and Jewish studies at George Washington University and for the past several years has been extensively involved in interreligious dialogue between Muslims and Jews.

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