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"Middle East Peacebuilding with People of the Book: Problems and Prospects in  
the US Context"

By

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### **Abstract**

The current deadly course of the Arab-Israeli conflict represents a daunting challenge to the Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities in the United States. Since these communities are ostensibly Biblically or Qur'anically committed to justice, the actions of the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority often leave their respective supporters with untenable choices. Uncritical support for either side in this conflict often leaves people of conscience in the position of supporting policies or actions that violate basic principles of justice. On the other hand, anyone who criticizes either side's unjust policies or actions are usually charged (depending on which community they are from) with being "racist", "anti-Semitic", "supportive of apartheid", "a collaborator", "self-hating" or worse. A complicating factor in this situation is that each of these US

Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities is very diverse in their religious, political and ethnic compositions.

Given the above, the purpose of this presentation is to provide a theoretical framework for an effective intergroup paradigm for bringing together key elements of the US Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities for the purpose of assertive peace building in the Middle East. The following assumptions undergird this effort:

1. Partially because holy sites of all three faiths are in this area, the Arab-Israeli conflict has a strong negative impact on how major segments of the Jewish, Muslim and Christian communities interact in the United States.
2. The Middle East conflict is setting the stage for long-term enmity between the US Jewish and Muslim communities.
3. Both sides in the Arab-Israeli conflict have significant material and/or moral support from various elements in the US Jewish, Muslim and Christian communities.
4. A major consequence of the current situation is that a disproportionate amount of time and energy is spent on the Arab-Israeli conflict while other domestic and international issues are not effectively addressed.
5. The US Jewish, and Muslim and Christian communities should see themselves as major stakeholders in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

## Introduction

*“O ye who believe! stand out firmly for Allah as witnesses to fair dealing and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is next to Piety: and fear Allah for Allah is well-acquainted with all that ye do.(Qur’an,-Al-Maida,5:8, AYA)*

Early on in on what is now known as the Al-Aqsa intifada, two events involving young people helped to crystallized this author’s resolve to try to do something about this madness. The first one occurred on September 30, 2000. On that day, twelve year old Muhammad al-Durrah was caught in a deadly crossfire between Israeli and Palestinian forces. In a mind-numbing event captured by French television cameras, the world watched in horror as this young boy was killed by Israeli gunfire while his father pleaded for their lives. What made this event extraordinary was not the fact that a child was killed. Sadly, this is an all too frequent occurrence in this bitter conflict. What made it extraordinary was the fact that it was caught on videotape. Thus it was almost instantaneously beamed into millions of homes around the world.

The second incident occurred on October 12, 2000. On this particular day, a group of Israeli soldiers apparently got lost and ended up in Ramallah, a Palestinian town. Two of the soldiers were brutally killed by a Palestinian crowd. They were stabbed and stomped to death and at least one mutilated body was dragged through the streets. The gravity of this event is symbolized by yet another shocking image beamed around the world - a photo of a young Palestinian holding up his bloodstained hands with an apparent look of glee at

the killing of these soldiers. Not only are we killing and maiming our youth in this conflict – we are apparently breeding within them a deep-seated, sometimes murderous hatred for the “other side”. If this is what we have come to in this conflict, it is clear that more outside intervention is needed. Something must be done to stop this carnage

The statistics are horrifying to anybody with a sense of justice, mercy and empathy. Since the start of the most recent Intifada in September 2000 up until the end of March, 2003 over 700 Jews and more than 2000 Palestinians have been killed, Of those killed, approximately 25 - 35% were 18 years old or younger. As the carnage continues, both sides argue that they are only doing what they are forced to do by the other side. In light of what Jews, Christians and Muslims claim to believe about justice, can either side morally or rationally defend the slaughtering of the other side's innocent children? Clearly, it is in the best interests of these children and children throughout the world to at least make a concerted effort to bring this conflict to an end.

Given the seriousness of this situation, it is also in the best interests of American Jewish, Christian and Muslim leadership to work cooperatively to assist in the solving of the Israeli – Palestinian conflict. This paper describes an ongoing endeavor aimed at bringing national Jewish, Muslim, and Christian key players together in an attempt to positively influence the bringing about of a stable just peace in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In describing the project, three propositions are advanced:

1. The current situation in Israel-Palestine presents a clear threat to the actualization of justice, one of the critical core values of Judaism, Christianity and Islam
2. The American Jewish and Muslim communities are important stakeholders in the outcome of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.
3. A coalition of a influential Jews, Christians and Muslims could be a positive, viable “third force” in the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In presenting this paper, the intention is to provide a practical working model for Jewish, Christian and Muslim groups who are seriously interested in bringing the Israeli –Palestinian conflict to an end in way that is based on justice and stability for the region. Any feedback is encouraged and welcome.

1. **The current situation in Israel-Palestine presents a clear threat to the actualization of justice, one of the critical core values of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.**

*“Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly.” (Torah - Leviticus 9:15, NIV)*

*"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.” (New Testament - Matthew 23:23, NIV)*

*“O ye who believe! Stand out firmly for justice as witnesses to Allah even as against yourselves or your parents or your kin and whether it be (against) rich or*

*poor: for Allah can best protect both. Follow not the lusts (of your hearts) lest ye swerve and if ye distort (justice) or decline to do justice verily Allah is well-acquainted with all that ye do.” (Qur’an – An-Nisaa 4:135, AYA)*

As indicated by the scriptures quoted above, justice is a critical core value that these three faith traditions have in common. In addition, all three of these communities see the prophet Abraham as a patriarch and role model. In their own unique ways, each of these communities claims to be serving God in the manner ordained by that same God. Further, because the Qur’an specifically refers to earlier revelations given to Jews and Christians, Muslims regard Jews and Christians as “People of the Book” who have a special relationship with Muslims. While there are significant differences between these groups when it comes to the nature of God and who is going to heaven or hell, there is no disagreement on the idea that the Creator demands justice as a core value for human beings.

From its inception, the community of Moses has been a community concerned with justice. Perhaps this is because of the centrality of the Torah-based Exodus story to how the Jewish community understands itself. In many ways, the bitter enslavement of the Jews in Egypt taught the Jewish community much about the nature of communal justice and injustice. Even the horror of the German holocaust has not overshadowed the religious, moral and political significance of the Jews’ slavery and subsequent freedom from the arrogance of the then reigning Pharaoh. Perhaps this is why members of the US Jewish community have often been critical leaders in movements involving justice-related issues such gender equity and racial desegregation.

Jesus Christ, a practicing Jew, is the central figure in worldwide Christianity. His biblically reported encounters with the Pharisees of his day indicate his view on the matter of justice. He emphasized just dealings, particularly by those with religious authority. His teachings clearly focused on his vision of justice as articulated in what is known as “The lord’s prayer” wherein he reportedly teaches his followers to pray to God with the words “*Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*” (Bible –Matthew 6:10, NIV). With such a teacher as a role model, it is small wonder that many American Christians have been in the forefront of such justice - based struggles as those aimed at protecting the environment or sheltering the homeless.

Setting up of a just community as ordained by the Creator was the focus Muhammad ibn Abdullah’s historic migration from Mecca to Medina. This event is so important to the Muslim community’s self-understanding that the Muslim calendar begins with that fateful year. Muhammad’s message certainly stressed strong, clear, unequivocal monotheism but it also emphasized just dealings between human beings. According to widely accepted Islamic tradition, Muslims will also be ultimately rewarded for kindness and justice not only to neighbors (Muslim or non-Muslim) but also toward animals. Consequently, during the Ottoman Empire, for example, there were public endowments for the care of animals. Muslims, as a nascent community in the United States are beginning to revive this legacy by starting to get involved in a variety of movements aimed at bringing about justice.

Given the focus of Judaism, Christianity and Islam on the ideal of communal justice, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict presents a vexing problem indeed. There are several interconnecting reasons for this. First all, the territory in dispute includes the city of Jerusalem and other places deemed sacred by one or more of these three faith traditions. Jerusalem is the most important of these places because for all three of the groups, Jerusalem figures prominently in each group's founding narrative. In other words, without the stories of Jerusalem and the temple; Jerusalem and Jesus and Jerusalem and Muhammad, Judaism Christianity and Islam would simply not be the same. If anyone of these communities leaves out Jerusalem, the essence of that faith changes dramatically.

Second, at least some of the impetus for the establishment of the state of Israel had to do with collective Western guilt because of the West's actions or inaction in the face of Hitler's ghastly "final solution". One indicator of this is that several national Jewish organizations respond to the slightest criticism of the state of Israel as "anti-Semitic" akin to the kind that sparked the holocaust.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, the central adversaries in this conflict come from two of the three major claimants to the faith of Abraham – Judaism and Islam. In addition, the United States, which gives monetary and material support to both sides (but mainly to the Israelis) is an overwhelmingly Christian nation. How can Judaism, Islam and Christianity profess to be religions of justice with the kind of almost daily slaughter of innocents that occurs as a result of this conflict? For the atheists and agnostics of the world (whose numbers are

reportedly growing) this situation in Israel-Palestine is clear proof that these faith traditions are morally bankrupt when it comes to issues of justice. Thus, the current situation in Israel-Palestine presents a clear threat to the actualization of justice, one of the critical core values of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

## **2. The American Jewish and Muslim communities are important stakeholders in the outcome of the Israel-Palestinian conflict.**

*“O ye who believe! stand out firmly for Allah as witnesses to fair dealing and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is next to Piety: and fear Allah for Allah is well-acquainted with all that ye do. (Qur’an – Al-Maida 5:8, AYA)*

Many national Jewish and Muslim organizations are engaged in a high stakes public relations and lobbying war that has major implications for American public policy. On one side you have pro Zionist groups that pour millions of dollars into an effort that many Jews and non-Jews see as perhaps the most successful public relations and political lobbying endeavor in this country. On the other side, you have largely Muslim pro-Palestinian organizations operating with less money while having to cope with the powerful negative influences of the horrific events of September 11, 2001. As of now, the pro-Zionist forces seem to winning the battle for the hearts and minds of America’s average citizens and Washington’s politicians. Thus, the first reason that American Jewish and Muslim communities are important stakeholders in then outcome of Israeli-Palestinian conflict is because most of their respective national organizations act as if this conflict is of one of their top priorities.

A second related reason that the American Jewish and Muslim communities are important stakeholders in the outcome of the Israeli Palestinian conflict is that what happens in Israel/Palestine greatly impacts relations between Jews and Muslims in the United States. Every Palestinian suicide bombing of Israelis and every death of Palestinian noncombatants at the hands of Israel's soldiers strain relations between these two communities. Both American Jews and Muslims have families in areas where civilians are routinely killed. Even those without family ties have a visceral negative reaction to what they view as yet one more unjust killing of one of their own. Not surprisingly, national Jewish and Muslim organizations have publicly taken one another to task for their respective pro-Zionist or pro-Palestinian positions. Each side accuses the other side of supporting murder and genocide. This on-going situation is causing a widening rift between the two communities. The likelihood is that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will "poison the water" between American Jewish and Muslims for a long time to come.

There is a yet another reason that the American Jewish and Muslim communities are important stakeholders in the outcome of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As long as so many of the American Jewish and Muslim community resources are tied up in dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, other serious issues do not get the attention they need. For American Jews this includes such fundamental domestic issues as American Jewish identity formation intermarriage, anti-Semitism and related civil rights issues. For the extremely diverse American Muslim community, this includes such domestic issues as

Muslim American identify formation, the building of a social, cultural and political in restructure and the development of appropriate religious and secular educational entities. On foreign policy issues both communities have other “hot spots” that need more attention. In short, if a just stable peace comes to Israel-Palestine, many of resources now focused on that conflict by American Jews and Muslims could be used to focus on some other important domestic and foreign issues. Thus, the American Jewish and Muslims communities are important stakeholders in the outcome of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.

**3. A coalition of influential Jews Christians and Muslims could be a positive viable “third force” in the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.**

Since November of 2000, a member of Manhattanville College (Purchase NY) World Religions faculty (the author, a Muslim) and the President of the College (a Jew) have been meeting to discuss such a project. They have been in contact with key people in national Jewish, Christian and Muslim organizations in an as yet unsuccessful attempt to put together such an effort. This “third force” coalition would be based on the following model outlined in the following key elements from the project's founding document:

**Purpose:** Act as an academically-based think tank for the implementation of a “third force” in encouraging the Israelis and the Palestinians to mutually agree to end violent hostilities as soon as possible as a way of protecting the lives and characters of the youth in the areas of conflict.

**Methodology:** We would organize and support a small group of stakeholders who are nationally/internationally connected using a “mutual gains” orientation. The group would work primarily behind the scenes through private contacts as a way of assisting Israel and the Palestinian Authority in working to end the violence against children in the region. Relevant educational and research activities would also be a part of the project.

**Rationale** We owe it to our future generation here and abroad to try to stop this carnage as soon as possible. As residents of the United States we have the right to insist that our private donations and tax dollars not be used to support either sides’ killing or brutalizing of children.

**Composition:** A small group of people who have multiple domestic and / or international contacts and / or other resources. The group should have at least two members under 30 years old.

**Institutional Support:** Manhattanville College’s Mission of educating “students to become ethically and socially responsible leaders for the global community” is evident in this venture. As the project develops, appropriate faculty, departments and students would be involved. Additionally, the College has significant institutional and individual linkages that might prove useful in this effort.

The intent is that this project would create yet another influential force for a just, stable peace in the Middle East. Under the coordination of a Jew and Muslim with significant contacts in all three communities, the hope is to actualize the ideal as exemplified by Malcolm X in *“The Autobiography of Malcolm X”* where we find the following statement:

“I’m for truth, no matter who tells it. I’m for justice, no matter who it is for or against. I’m a human being, first and foremost, and as such I’m for whoever and whatever benefits humanity as a whole”