

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

OPINION

The Obstacles to Israeli-Palestinian Peace

BY ABDURRAHMAN WAHID and ABDUL A'LA

Saturday, May 10, 2008 12:01 a.m. EDT

The prolonged Israeli-Palestinian conflict has a far-reaching impact not only upon the lives of those who dwell in the Holy Land, but upon virtually every nation and community on earth. On a daily basis, self-interested parties are callously manipulating the most basic values of humanity and religion in order to advance their personal or political interests. Sectarianism, violence, arrogance and deception are constantly subverting the fundamental values of life, and turning religious principles upon their heads.

This horrific process demands that every moral human being, religious community and nation throughout the world contemplate this tragedy and offer assistance, however small, to help resolve the profound human crisis in the Holy Land. Peace is both a process and a goal that the world can neither morally nor practically afford to push off into the future yet again.

We must develop and implement concrete strategies to resolve the conflict, while inspiring hope that peace can actually be achieved. The problem is that the various obstacles to peace seem nearly impossible to eliminate. These obstacles are rendered even more severe by the fact that both major parties in the conflict harbor groups absolutely convinced of the correctness of their mutually exclusive views and agendas. Such groups reject not only the rights, but the very existence, of the other side.

The corrosive effect of this phenomenon is the evocation and rationalization of the use of violence, either through terrorism or militarism. Prejudiced views on both sides, not only by those directly engaged in the conflict, but by their allies as well, further stoke the flames of hatred and violence.

These prejudices contaminate public discourse throughout the world, and are constantly exploited by Middle Eastern regimes that fuel anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic emotions for political purposes, while displaying little or no actual concern for the well-being of the Palestinians themselves.

Under such conditions, it is nearly impossible for sincere dialogue even to occur, much less to develop or flourish. Instead, the cycle of violence breeds a hardening of mutual hatred.

The Palestinian side routinely condemns its enemy as a colonial power whose entire population is demonized as "imperialists," while the Israeli side brands its political opponents as terrorists, or terrorist sympathizers.

For six decades, the peace process has been conducted primarily by self-interested political players who cannot penetrate to the heart of the underlying problems, much less resolve them.

This gives rise to deeply cynical views on the part of certain groups on both sides, who view the peace process as absurd, its goals unobtainable, and continued violence better than compromise.

Yet the difficulties that have swamped every Israeli-Palestinian peace process to date do not mean that achieving peace is impossible. Rather, they point to the need for a new and more holistic path to peace in the Middle East. This path would mobilize the populations of Israel and Palestine toward this goal, with the active encouragement and support of the rest of the world.

The December 2007 visit to Israel and Palestine by a group of Indonesian ulama from the world's two largest Muslim organizations – LibForAll Foundation and the Indonesian Peace Delegation – represents one such effort, and the first step in a larger, systematic process. Conducted under the joint aegis of LibForAll Foundation and the Simon Wiesenthal Center, members of the group consistently observed that the silent majorities on both sides of the conflict sincerely desire an end to the cycle of violence, and peace for themselves and their children. This is remarkable, given the decades of incitement to hatred and violence in Palestinian mosques, schools and mass media, and a political culture that eschews compromise.

It is tragic that the voice of the people – full of an honest and sincere longing for peace – should be drowned out by violence and the narrow interests of politicians and extremists on both sides. We have a responsibility to amplify the voices of the innocent who pay with their blood and sorrow the price of others' ambitions and hatred.

We must also strengthen and facilitate the people's efforts to pressure their political elites – in a manner that is focused, intense and vocal, yet simultaneously civilized – to create a just and lasting peace.

Palestinians and Israelis need the world's support to create a new reality, in which the highest values of religion and humanity are restored to their proper dignity. We must also help Muslim populations – not only in Palestine, but throughout the Arab world – to rise to embrace a profoundly spiritual and tolerant understanding of Islam, and a humanistic attitude toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that acknowledges the legacy of suffering on all sides. Such an attitude is a necessary precondition for recognizing Israel's unique history and right to exist, while truly advancing the interests of Palestinians as well.

Last year's LibForAll/Indonesian Peace mission to Israel and Palestine was designed to initiate such a process. After the religious leaders who participated returned to Indonesia, they faced intense condemnation from Muslim extremists, who accused them of having betrayed their Palestinian brethren and embarrassed Indonesia's Muslim community. Yet there is nothing shameful about working to realize the highest values of religion – which God intended to serve as a blessing, and not a curse, to all of humanity.

Although the obstacles to peace in the Holy Land may appear insurmountable, it is the responsibility of religious leaders on all sides to attempt the impossible, and to accept whatever threats, slander and stigma may follow.

Mr. Wahid is the former president of Indonesia and co-founder of LibForAll Foundation. Mr. A'la is an associate dean of graduate studies at Sunan Ampel Islamic State University in Surabaya, Indonesia.