International Journal of Psychology and Behavioral Sciences 2012, 2(5): 142-147
DOI: 10.5923/j.ijpbs.20120205.03

The Psychological Origin of the 1300-Year-Old Arab-Israeli War: How History Must Guide Policy Making

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Abstract This psycho-historical analysis advances the hypothesis that the long-standing hostilities between Israel and her Arab neighbors is fundamentally a religious conflict with a significant psychological component. The origins of the war and standoff between the parties are traced back to the time of the founding of Islam and the encounter between Muhammad and the Jews of what is now Saudi Arabia. When the Jews rejected Muhammad as the Apostle of God, he experienced a severe psychological wound leading to a series of actions that would now be referred to as acts of narcissistic rage. This rage was transcribed into the Qur'an and has become an integral part of Islamic-Jewish relations since that time. Key historical and psychological contexts are provided and serve as the basis for recommended next steps to be taken to promote the peace process, including roles for political and consulting psychologists.

Keywords Arab-Israeli relations, terrorism, Middle East, political psychology

1. Introduction

Experts seeking solutions to the seemingly endless hostilities in the Middle East generally agree that unless the fundamental issues underlying the conflict are addressed, no lasting peace can be established. A superficial analysis would suggest that a "return" of land to the Palestinian Arabs by Israel would lead to the establishment of a peaceful, democratic Palestinian State and to Arab and Islamic acceptance of the rights of the Jews to a nation of their own along side them. Unfortunately, such a view is misconceived as evidenced by the Arab rejection of the Wye River Accords in 2000 and many other proposals that have been largely comprised of Israeli concessions. Even the 2006 Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip was followed by calls for the establishment of a Palestinian State with Jerusalem(Israel's capital) as its capital, and Gaza was turned into and remains a staging ground for thousands of rockets fired into civilian areas of Israel. The parliamentary election victory by Hamas in 2006, although in part a response to Palestinian frustration with many years of corruption and failure to address their needs by the Arafat led Fatah faction, also reflects the deeply rooted Muslim/Arab antipathy to the existence of Israel under any circumstances or set of concessions. It would be a mistake to assume that territorial exchanges are the key solution to this tragic war. The origin of the conflict long predated the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and its recapture of the West Bank in 1967. The present analysis provides psychological and historical evidence that the fundamental issues that caused and maintain the conflict are rooted in psychological wounds and religious differences. Each successive American administration since 1968, to which the international community has looked to for leadership for solving the conflict, has failed to consider this psychological and long-term historical context. It is imperative that the US and world leaders take the deeper and broader view needed to make meaningful inroads toward bringing peace to the region.

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Published online at http://journal.sapub.org/ijpbs

2. Historical Context

The genesis of the Middle East conflict can be traced back to the time of the founding of Islam and its first encounter with Judaism. In the year 622 CE, Muhammad made his Hijrah(pilgrimage) from Mecca to Medina. Mecca was a major center of pagan religions where the Kabba was the major pagan shrine. Muhammad and his followers were clearly not accepted there. Medina, called Yatrib at that time, was a center for the Jews of the Hijaz(central region) of what is now Saudi Arabia. The Jewish population was estimated to be 36 to 42 thousand and possibly made up a majority of the city. More than 20 Jewish tribes were settled in and around Yatrib. Jews had been in the region for several hundred years and had become arabicised to such an extent that their tribes adopted Arabic names. The second largest settlement of

Jews was in Khaybar, approximately 90 miles north of Yatrib. There was no monolithic Jewish Community in the Hijaz as many of the tribes sided against one another(some allying with the Byzantine Empire others the Persian) and rarely did they come to each other's aid in subsequent battles with Muhammad.

2.1. Muhammad Encounters the Jews

By some accounts, Muhammad's exposure to Judaism began at a young age, while he was raised by an uncle who was a prominent merchant most of whose business was with Jews[1]. Following his pilgrimage to Medina, Muhammad had many dealings with the large Jewish population there. The interactions between Muhammad and the Jews have been the subject of several scholarly analyses[2-4], which serve as the bases for the historical background presented here. The influence of Judaism on Muhammad was substantial and is exemplified by his selection of Jerusalem as the original direction(qiblah) toward which one faced when praying(as in Judaism). Other influences, among many, included the adoption of dietary laws and initially observing Yom Kippur, which he called the Fast of Ashura, as a Day of Atonement. Friday was selected as the Muslim Sabbath as this was the day that the Jews prepared for their own day of rest. The initial collegial relations between Muhammad and the Jews came to an abrupt end in the year 624 when they rejected him as the true or final prophet of God. Considerable controversy surrounds a pact(the Sahifah, sometimes referred to as The Constitution of Medina) that Muhammad established between his followers(the Muhajirun, members of the Quraysh who traveled with him from Mecca), the Jews, and the Ansar(people of Medina who became his helpers). The pact, a form of non-aggression arrangement, made no specific mention of the three main Jewish tribes, any obligations of allegiance, or of the Jews converting to Muhammad's new faith, but this was likely a vision of the prophet.(Throughout history, religious leaders have targeted the Jews for conversion, seeking the endorsement of the world's first monotheistic faith). Fatigued from a long history of being approached by false prophets, at least some of the Jews were demeaning when declining Muhammad's offer to be their spiritual leader and source of divine revelations. Leading Jewish satirists and poets(positions of considerable impact at that time) ridiculed Muhammad and his followers, particularly insulting Muslim women. The impact on Muhammad was most likely those of shame and humiliation leading to what is referred to as *narcissistic rage* in the psychological literature[5]. In response, he dispatched assassins to kill two of the Jewish satirists, thus demonstrating his rage and establishing the precedent of using assassins against Jewish tribal leaders and later as a sect in Islam. This tradition continues today in the form of Islamist terrorists whose aim, among others, is vengeance for Muhammad(against the non-believers).

3. Psychological Background

Narcissistic rage follows a deep self-esteem wound in individuals whose underlying sense of self-worth and acceptance are already extremely vulnerable due to early life emotional deprivations/traumas such as loss of or abuse by parents. It typically leads to an obsession with avenging the humiliation and partially blinds the reality testing of the wounded party. A modern day example is Saddam Hussein(who experienced early life losses and humiliations similar to those of Muhammad) who attempted to psychologically compensate with an all-encompassing drive to achieve and later preserve his power and honor without any concern for the welfare of his own country[6], a behavioral pattern that he took with him to his grave. These are features frequently noted in individuals with narcissistic personality disorders whose adaptations to life are characterized by a grandiose sense of self(sometimes believing they have a special connection with God that others do not), a profound degree of entitlement, and a hypersensitivity to criticism or doubting of their specialness. In what the psychoanalyst Otto Kernberg[7] referred to as malignant narcissism, the individual tends to have a paranoid outlook on the motives of others and believes that the use of aggression in the service of one's own needs does not need to be contained as further exemplified by Saddam Hussein[8].

In his famous biography of Muhammad, Montgomery Watt[9] details the many early life losses and hardships the Prophet endured that undoubtedly shaped his character, motivations, and manner of coping with rejection. Muhammad was a young orphan, his father having died before his birth and his mother died when he was just six years old. The first two years of his life were spent under the care of a wet-nurse away from his mother, apparently a custom in Meccan families. After the mother's death, he was raised by a grandfather for two years and after his death by an uncle, neither of whom provided him the degree of attention or material wealth given to their own children. Few other details of his childhood and early adulthood are known. He married at approximately the age of 25 years(595 CE) to a woman fifteen years his senior who had wealth and independence. He turned to his first wife, Khadijah, for a great deal of spiritual and emotional support particularly when confronted by his doubters in Mecca who viewed his revelations as indications of mental illness or sorcery rather than communications from God. There is at least one documented occasion in which he was stoned by doubters, and was excluded from many of the commercial opportunities by other clans who felt his religious views would be harmful to business interests. Both Khadijah and his uncle died in 619 after which there are signs that deepening religious experiences replaced human companionship for him. Only after this did he take multiple wives but he never again had the mother figure or emotional support his first wife provided. Thus, through the age of 50 years, Muhammad suffered many significant emotional, developmental, and self-esteem wounds. These wounds resulted in a hypersensitivity to rejection. An example of this is a quote sometimes attributed to him(but not accepted by all

authorities) that "If anyone insults me, then any Muslim who hears this must kill him immediately"[10]. This background is the basis for understanding his actions once he had achieved a position of power and influence.

4. Muhammad's Rage and Wars against the Jews

In the year 624, following his rejection by the Jews, Muhammad changed the direction of prayer from Jerusalem to Mecca, discontinued the observance of the Fast of Ashura and created the Fast of Ramadan as the period for atonement, and expanded the number of daily prayers to five. He came to the view that the Jews he encountered practiced a deliberately falsified version of Judaism, and conceived the idea that the first Jew, Abraham, was actually the first Muslim and therefore Islam was the first and true revealed religion. Further, he promulgated the view that Abraham was the one who established the Meccan sanctuary(The Kabba) and the annual celebration at that site, and that Ishmael rather than Isaac was the son that Abraham nearly sacrificed. This enabled his revelation to supplant Judaism(this also served as a coping mechanism for his sense of humiliation). In addition, the Qur'an later became filled with many anti-Jewish references largely to the effect that the Jews had transgressed against God by disbelieving his apostle and therefore were afflicted with humiliation and poverty.(Legend has it that shortly before his death, Muhammad said that Judaism and Islam shall not exist together on the Arabian Peninsula.) In the year of his rejection by the Jews(624), he began a war against the three major Jewish tribes, whose presence impeded his desire to establish a theocratic monarchy. This involved dispatching assassins(seeking "the glory of killing a Jew," according to one of his followers) against tribal leaders and satirists/poets, forcefully expelling one of the tribes, and leading a massacre of all of the adult males of another. There are few better examples in history of a narcissistic rage reaction than Muhammad's to his failure to convert the Jews, and no better explanation of the fundamental issues of the contemporary Middle East conflict than the events of 624-628 CE.

The Jews felt threatened by Muhammad's growing movement in Medina and the implications this had for changing the political landscape in the region. They often aligned themselves with other groups who opposed the expansion of his influence sometimes even encouraging them, but there is no documentation of any military actions by the Jewish tribes against Muhammad. Although the larger Jewish tribes were economically strong, they posed no direct threat to Muhammad and his followers. The war he waged is probably best accounted for on the basis of his rage/ humiliation at their rejection of him as the apostle of God and the need to remove the representatives of the original monotheistic faith to enable nascent Islam to assert its claim as the authentic revealed faith. The first siege by Muhammad and his followers against the Jews was directed at the Banu Qaynuqa that lasted 15 days before they surrendered. It was in response, by some accounts, to the insulting of a Muslim woman by a Jew in the market place who was then killed by a Muslim man who was subsequently killed by other Jews witnessing the event. Other accounts are that it was in response to an arrogant rejection of Muhammad. It is not clear whether the Jews were actually expelled and their property seized until several years later; their arms were confiscated however. His wrath was next turned against the Banu al-Nadir the following year(625) in response to their attempts to arouse revenge of his Meccan opponents following his victory against them in the Battle of Badr in 624. The siege against the Jews lasted two weeks. They were expelled with only the possessions they could carry except for their weapons. Some fled to Khaybar, others to Syria. The land and remaining property was distributed among the Muhajirun.

Muhammad and his followers then turned against the last of the three major Jewish tribes, the Banu Qurayzah in the year 627 following the unsuccessful siege of Medina by the Meccans. Qurayzah attempted to stay neutral in the conflict, and there is some suggestion that they supplied Muhammad's troops with the tools to dig the trenches used to defeat the Meccans, but he saw them as a threat nonetheless. The Jews surrendered quickly. He appointed Sa'd Mu'adh, who he had earlier entrusted with the killing of one of the Jewish poets, as the judge of what should be done with the captives. Later Islamic writers suggest that the Jews requested Sa'd as arbitrator, but this is doubtful. The judgment was the death of all adult males(estimated to be as many as 900), division of all property among the believers, and the women and children were taken as slaves. The executions were carried out in the market of Medina, in the presence of Muhammad, as trenches were dug and the heads of the condemned were struck off. The executioners were Ali(Muhammad's son-in-law) and another follower. A recent analysis of Islamic-Jewish relations[11] raises doubts about the historical accuracy of whether this massacre actually occurred(the first written source is more than 100 years after its purported occurrence); however, this event has become an integral part of Islamic lore and the massacre of the Banu Qurayzah is cited by Islamic leaders as a source of great pride and as a precedent for how to deal with the Jews today.

Following this massacre, Khaybar contained the last stronghold of Jewish presence in the peninsula. They aligned themselves with those who opposed the rising power and dominance of Islam. With Muhammad's permission, his followers sent a party to kill the leader of the Jews of Khaybar. In 628, he and his followers besieged Khaybar. Among the Jews was the clan of Abu l-Huqayq who was promised safety on condition that they hand over everything of value. When one of the sons failed to disclose the site of the family's treasure, Muhammad ordered the males of the clan killed and their wives and children enslaved. One of the sons, Kinana b. Abi l-Huyayq, was tortured before being executed – that night Muhammad married the murdered

man's wife, Safiyya, whose own father was killed during the massacre of the Qurayza[12]. Ultimately a negotiated peace favoring the Muslims was struck with the Jews(half of the produce and palm trees were confiscated).

5. Applications to the Contemporary Middle East

The narcissistic rage that led Muhammad and his followers to wage the series of wars against the Jews serves as the backdrop for understanding the contemporary Middle East conflict. The wound Muhammad felt and the anger aroused by his rejection by the Jews can be found throughout the Qur'an. A few examples are:(al-Ma'idah 5:80) "Thou seest many of them turning in friendship to the Unbelievers[his opponents]. Evil indeed are the works which their souls have sent forward before them with the result that God's wrath is upon them, and in torment will they abide" and(al-Ma'idah 5:81) "If only they had believed in God, in the Apostle, and in what hath been revealed to him, never would they have taken them[the Unbelievers] for friends and protectors, but most of them are rebellious wrong-doers"[13]. He described the Jews, along with the Pagans, as the greatest opponent of Islam. These references are read daily by Muslims and taught in Islamic schools and mosques. In the radical world of the Islamists, there is no balance or context provided to understand the relations of Muhammad to the Jews such as the fact that Muhammad had great respect for the Jews, at least initially, referring to them as the People of the Book and adopting all of their prophets as earlier revelations from God before his ultimate revelations(in fact, his extolling of the Jews may have set the stage for his sense of hurt, rejection, humiliation, and rage when they failed to adopt him as their prophet). The compelling manner in which Muhammad's sense of rejection, emotional wound, anger and outrage are transcribed in the Qur'an can easily arouse these same reactions in Muslims reading its passages. Until a more moderate and balanced teaching and interpretation of the Qur'an occurs, no set of land concessions by Israel will stem the Islamic wrath at the Jews that Muhammad first experienced and transcribed into the Qur'an and that his followers carry and pass on from generation to generation.

Muhammad's rejection by the Jews appears to have been experienced as a grave psychological wound as his anger and aggression toward them was far greater than that directed against his military opponents and those who mocked and stoned him in Mecca. Yet, on the surface, it is almost inconceivable that the rejection by a few disconnected Jewish tribes could have so seriously wounded the powerful, dynamic, and influential leader who ultimately transformed the entire Arabian Peninsula from paganism to monotheism. The explanation lies in part in the deep-rooted sense of inadequacy and need for adulation of many of those who rise to positions of leading religious and political revolutions. This can be seen in the demand for total loyalty or subjugation to the leader by his followers; there is no tolerance for questioning or equivocation(in Islam it is referred to as *jihad* or submission). A sense of moral superiority is expounded as a way to defend against nonbelievers or those who lack full commitment to the faith, each of whom stir the underlying self-doubts in the founders or leaders(it is the wounds and sense of vulnerability from early life experiences and deprivations that drive them to seek positions of great power and influence). They tend to view other people as having the function of admiring and affirming them, rather than being independent individuals with needs of their own. Since the leader's need to feel grandiose can never be fully met, no finite number of converts or admirers is satisfactory. Muhammad's conquests of Medina and Khaybar were not sufficient to mollify him; he continued to expand his empire eventually conquering Mecca and turning the Kabba into a shrine for Allah and lending great prestige to his revelations(many in the Islamic world today believe their mission is to force all peoples to submit to their faith). The need to promote a sense of superiority as a psychological defense was carried on later by Muhammad's followers, after his death, in the conception of the *dhimmi*(the non-Muslim inhabitant of the Muslim State) that dominated relations between Muslims and those of other faiths until the decline of the Islamic world beginning in the middle of the eighteenth century. Many rules governed the lives of the dhimmi, a form of second-class citizen. For example, a non-Muslim could not strike a Muslim even if assaulted first and their places of worship could not exceed the height of mosques. With specific reference to their relations with the Jews, Muslims have never accepted them as "equals" – a precedent for failure of the Islamic Middle East to accept a Jewish State on equal terms. This was the basis on which six Arab armies invaded of the infant state of Israel in 1948; later, the PLO began its terrorist operations in 1964/65, well before Israel had authority over any Palestinian Arab populations, which demonstrates the offense the Islamic world felt that a Jewish state was founded and later thriving in their midst. The reports by some, such as Bernard Lewis[14], that Jews often fared better under Muslim than Christian rule must take into account that Jews were always members of the dhimmi class. The view of Jews as less than their equal has not changed in the collective Islamic mind despite the founding of a strong, independent Israel.

Nearly 1300 years after Muhammad's virtual elimination of the Jews of the Arabian Peninsula, the 12 million Jews of the world are an emotional lightening rod for many of the estimated 1.5 billion Muslims(a ratio of less than 1:100). This cannot be explained in terms of any existential threat the Jews could possibly pose to the Muslim world or that of Israel to the 20-plus Arab/Islamic states. In terms of size, economic strength, or military prowess, the collective Islamic world is an enormously powerful force. The movement Muhammad began has greatly flourished in many respects. Yet, the contemporary rage of the Muslim world against the Jews and the establishment of their own country parallel that of Muhammad and his followers when they

failed to accept him as the Apostle of God. His sense of humiliation and subsequent rage, carried on today through its transcription in the Qur'an, will not be assuaged in his followers by Israeli concessions of land, natural resources, resettlement of refugees, or even through Islamist aims of eliminating the State of Israel. The rejection of Muhammad by the Jews of Medina became and remains a "chosen trauma"[15] by his followers, that is, a severely humiliating emotional wound extremely difficult to mourn adaptively and heal as the wound threatens the group's identity. In this case, the survival of the Jewish people and their establishment of a strong nation of their own threaten the Muslim sense of being the ultimate revealed faith. According to Volkan, the chosen trauma is passed on from one generation to the next and may remain as fresh as if it had just occurred. This is certainly evident in many segments of the Islamic world's policy toward the existence of Israel. According to Dennis Ross[16], the establishment of the State of Israel and its survival of the 1948 War of Independence is referred to by the Palestinians as the *Nakba*(the catastrophe).

6. Implications for the Peace Process

The chronic grudge and need for vengeance felt by many modern day followers of Muhammad against the Jews will only begin to resolve with a more balanced teaching of the Qur'an(i.e., that jihad refers to personal struggle and submission to God rather than armed struggle and forced conversions) and highlighting of the fact that Jews and Muslims have much in common in terms of biblical heritage, religious practice, and ethical values. The moderate voices of the Islamic faith must reassert control over the education of its followers and quell the more radical elements among them who feel compelled to rail against the West, and the Jews in particular, in protest of the fall of the Islamic empire over the last 200 years and of the survival of the original monotheistic faith that rejected their Apostle. In addition, meetings of religious leaders from both faiths are needed to promote reconciliation for the emotional wound suffered by Muhammad and the subsequent history of Muslim violence against the Jews. This will create opportunities for political and consulting psychologists who can assist in identifying the wounds felt on both sides of the conflict and by facilitating productive dialogues(e.g., bringing together groups of members of both faiths to establish common ground). This is not a task for the US Department of State or the United Nations, as both have continuously failed or refused to examine these underlying issues but instead perseverate on nonproductive political and territorial concessions that at best have superficial appeal(Reich[17] recently noted that "American officials in past administrations have tried – sometimes as one of them put it recently, religiously, and often blindly and self-deceptively – to broker an Israeli-Palestinian peace treaty"). These psychological issues can be addressed by providing opportunities for each party to mourn the losses passed down by prior generations and those due to present day violence as well encouraging each side to experience and mourn each other's losses[15]. Until this occurs, land-for-peace initiatives between Israel and Palestinian Arabs will not bring acceptance of a Jewish state in the Muslim dominated Middle East or an end to Islamist terrorism directed against the Western World. Further evidence of the significant emotional reaction carried by many in the Muslim community is the fact that when parties to the Arab-Israeli conflict discuss the disposition of so-called occupied land, the Saudis and the present day followers of Muhammad make no offer of returning the Jewish lands of Medina/Yatrib and Khaybar that they now occupy in exchange for land being requested from Israel.

Encounters of the type described above between Israelis and Palestinian Arabs have occurred since the late 1970s with some successes under the guidance of social and political psychologists[18]. However, these have generally been meetings between political and academic experts with some influence within their own communities, but have not included the religious leaders being advocated in the present analysis. These previous efforts demonstrate the value of bringing the two sides together in a confidential setting, allowing relationships to develop, and then having the parties advocating moderation and solutions to their own respective political camps. Key to this process is for each side to feel fully understood by the other even if each does not agree with the other's perspective. An approach to this, based on our military experience in Afghanistan, is entitled Extreme Negotiations[19] and provides conceptual and practical steps for facilitating a dialogue between heated combatants.

A critical next step is the involvement of the religious leadership which has enormous influence on the political forces, particularly in the Muslim world, and without whose endorsement no lasting peaceful settlement can be established(it is this leadership and the manner it interprets and teaches the Qur'an that serves as the vessel of the "chosen trauma" of Muhammad's rejection; therefore, no long-term solutions can be achieved without their blessing). Psychological study of the role of religion in the political process and as a basis of terrorism has greatly increased since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks against the United States. Several multiple volume series have examined international terrorism from behavioral, demographic and religious perspectives[20] as well as the basis of violence in each of the three major monotheistic faiths with relevance for contemporary society[21]. These works contain compelling analyses of the role of religion in many of the world's current conflicts, including the Middle East and serve as an important basis for including influential members of the clergy in the peace process. This would allow for the possibility of the emotional healing of the severe psychological wound that gave rise to Muhammad's war with the Jews. It would likely require someone of the stature and demonstrated even-handedness of Quartet Representative(and former British PM) Tony Blair to receive

a favorable response from religious leaders on both sides to agreeing to any initial involvement in such a process. In light of the duration of this conflict and how ingrained this emotional wound is within the tenets of Islam, the reconciliation process will most likely take several generations. Political and territorial compromises may temporarily allay the wrath of those who carry Muhammad's wound, but this is no substitute for the psychological transformation needed in the Middle East. American administrations and world leaders who fail(or refuse) to consider this are guaranteed to fail in their efforts to broker a peace and will prolong the terrorist threats to their citizens.

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