

Murderous Religious Intolerance in the Middle East

On October 22, 2015, Secretary of State John Kerry, in the context of Palestinian terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians and the Israeli response to them, spoke of the need to end the incitement to violence and to lower the level of tension so that calm could be restored in the area. Speaking to Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, he asserted that both Israel and the Palestinians are interested in bringing an end to escalation of violence.

It is arguable whether Palestinian leaders are so interested.

German chancellor Angela Merkel, speaking on October 21, 2015, must have doubted the Palestinian interest when she said she expected Palestinian Authority head Mahmoud Abbas “to condemn everything that constitutes an act of terrorism. One cannot open talks with Israel if this does not happen.” So far, President Abbas has not done so in any serious fashion.

This indeed will not happen if the Palestinian leaders not only remain unwilling or unable to control young Palestinians from stabbing Jewish civilians, but also concoct stories that it is Israel that is fabricating stories of the stabbings, and even planting knives as fake evidence. The falsehood is reminiscent of the Orson Welles film noir masterpiece *Touch of Evil*, in which the corrupt and obsessed police captain plants evidence on people to get convictions.

Other Muslims have fervently rejected the idea of cooling the escalation in violence. Secretary Kerry, and indeed the whole civilized world, must have looked with horror at the 16-minute video released on October 23, 2015 by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In it a masked terrorist, armed with a

rifle and speaking fluent Hebrew, threatened to slaughter Israelis and Jews everywhere. He promised his viewers that soon there won't be a single Jew left in Jerusalem or in the whole country. Tens of thousands of these Islamic terrorists would soon be on the way to slaughter Jews and throw them into the garbage.



Israel's humane behavior does not resemble garbage, as Palestinian leaders obviously know. On October 20, a few days before the video, the brother-in-law of President Abbas underwent a successful life-saving heart surgery at a private hospital, Assuta Medical Center, in Tel Aviv. Israel has similarly helped other patients. One is the wife of Abbas who in 2014 was also treated at Assuta in a private room with security guards to maintain her privacy. Another was the sister of a senior Hamas leader, Moussa Abu Marzouk, who was treated for advanced cancer. Marzouk was listed as a specially designated terrorist by the U.S. Treasury Department. This was in addition to the Israeli treatment of relatives of other Hamas figures. Among them were the daughter, mother-in-law, and granddaughter of Ismail Haniyeh, another senior Hamas leader.

The Palestinian stabbing of Israeli Jews is focused on a religious war, supposedly about the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. It is time for the international community to recognize this as the basis of Palestinian refusal to make peace with Israel. It should forego political correctness and state clearly that murdering Jews is not the way to Paradise.

But attention must be paid also to the religious divisions and repressive policies in the Middle East. The International Religious Freedom Report, issued by the U.S. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, is valuable in indicating these divisions.

It is useful to compare the situation in three Muslim countries with that in Israel. There is no moral equivalence in this comparison. The Muslim countries in the Middle East are characterized by religious groups subject to religious intolerance and hostility and the accompanying political, economic, and ethnic suffering.

Israel, by its Basic Law on Human Dignity and Liberty, establishes freedom of religion, and the legal protection for religious freedom is enforced. The Israeli Supreme Court has upheld that freedom, including freedom of conscience, faith, religion, and worship, regardless of the religion of an individual. Though Israel is described as a "Jewish and democratic state," freedom of religion and conscience and legal political equality exist regardless of religious affiliation.

Consider some of the Muslim countries: Syria, Iraq, and Egypt.

The conflict in Syria began in March 2011 with peaceful protests by opponents of the Assad regime – mainly Sunni Muslims, but also religious minorities. It was primarily concerned with political rather than religious issues. But the conflict has become religiously sectarian to a large extent. Sunni Muslims, who previously constituted 75 percent of the population of 22 million, oppose the Alawites, the basis of Assad's regime, and Shia Muslims, who are about 13 percent of the population. Assad ordered a severe crackdown, using religious rhetoric against Sunni Muslim civilians, as well as crimes against humanity, including rape, torture, chemical weapons, and shelling of religious sites.

In Iraq, the government is unable to control the advances of ISIS in its territory. But the territory it does control has also contributed to violations of religious freedom, particularly against Sunni Muslims. Millions of Iraqis are now refugees or internally displaced. The brutal Saddam Hussein, though he favored the Sunni Muslim minority, maintained religious peace through fear. After he fell in

2003, the Shia Muslim majority, under PM Nouri al-Maliki, acted against the Sunnis, preventing peaceful protests, mistreating Sunni citizens and prisoners, and limiting the number of Sunnis in government and security positions. A major result of this was the entrance of ISIS, which now controls considerable parts of northern and central Iraq.

Even after Maliki resigned and was replaced by Haider al-Abadi, Sunnis are still abused by Shia security forces and militias.

The non-Muslim religions in Iraq, Catholic and Protestant Christians, Yazidis, and Sabeen Mandaean, who amount to 3 percent of the population, have always suffered and continue to suffer official and social discrimination. More than half of these communities have fled the country, been displaced, or been killed. Christians, estimated to amount to 1 million in 2003, now number less than 300,000.

ISIS, the self-declared caliphate since June 2014, is exceptional, as the video showed. It proclaims an extreme religious ideology that allows no diversity. All religious communities who do not accept that ideology have been subjected to extraordinary abuses, including expulsion from their historic homelands, forced conversions, rape, enslavement of women and children, torture, beheadings, and massacres.

After it captured Mosul in June 2014, ISIS issued an ultimatum that all Christians, whose community dates back 1,700 years, must convert to Islam, leave Mosul, pay a tax, or be killed.

ISIS murdered two Sunni officials, kidnapped Christian priests and nuns, and destroyed places of worship. Besides Christians, Sunni Muslims who disagree with the extremism of ISIS or who have tried to protect their religious group have been killed.

Egypt is in the throes of transition. President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who took office in June 2014, has encouraged

religious tolerance and proposed changes to religious curricula. He delivered a courageous speech in January 2015 to Muslim dignitaries at Al Azhar University urging reform of Islam. There appear to be fewer attacks on sectarian groups than previously. Previously, 52 churches had been totally destroyed and another 12 damaged. In December 2014, more than 40 perpetrators held responsible for attacks on five churches were sentenced to prison terms. Yet the main religious minority, the Coptic Christians, have not been completely protected from violence. Limits have been put on building and maintaining churches. In the main, discriminatory laws restricted freedom of expression, and courts prosecute citizens for "blasphemy." In particular, members and supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood have been harassed and imprisoned. In January 2015, President al-Sisi issued an order banning foreign publications held to be offensive to religion.

The once vibrant Jewish community in Egypt has now disappeared, but nevertheless, anti-Semitic publications and cartoons still appear. Those are now the mark of ISIS or influenced by it. American politicians have recently been concerned about videos in American politics. It is now time for them, especially Secretary Kerry, and indeed the whole civilized world, to denounce the foul and disgraceful video issued by ISIS.

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