

CULTURAL DE-ESCALATION PLAN FOR ISRAEL AND PALESTINE

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PREAMBLE

There will be no success to a strategic political plan at this point in time, no matter how rational it may be, unless there is a parallel effort to de-escalate the rage and fear that is propelling rejectionism and hardened positions in this conflict. One can speculate endlessly and argue about which side deserves greater blame for the current sequence of tragic events. A constructive approach, however, is to initiate strategically a bilateral set of actions affecting the general population that would allow the leadership on each side to achieve the necessary political space and communal consensus to move back to negotiations and toward a final settlement.

1. HOLY PLACES

Gestures of regret, honor and re-dedication should be made in every religious space that has been violated in Israel and Palestine in the last month. This includes the Dome of the Rock, Joseph's Tomb, in addition to various synagogues, mosques, and gravesites. These gestures should be bilateral, organized by a variety of existing interfaith organizations, but endorsed publicly by leading political figures on both sides, in addition to religious leaders on both sides. Third parties, such as the United States, need to make clear to both sides that this is a priority.

2. LOSS OF HUMAN LIFE

Loss of life is not only a human tragedy it is also a desecration of basic cultural and religious sensibilities. As such, mourning and joint expression of regrets can have the effect of reversing the cultural damage done by the infliction of harm in the last month.

3. THE INJURED

Efforts should be made to offer support to injured members of each community from the enemy community. There is evidence that this is taking place already in limited form, but, as with the other courses of action, it is given no support by the political leadership on all sides of this conflict. The effect of political endorsement would be dramatic.

4. FEAR

There is an overwhelming sense of fear that a majority of citizens feel in both communities about the future. Fear is a basic building block of hatred and political intransigence. Efforts must be made to build trust concerning the wishes and intentions of the majority in each community. The majority who have not participated in the violence and who do not condone excessive use of force are generally silenced by the political leadership. Ways must be found to foster greater communication between these majorities. Once again, there has never been any pressure on the political leaderships to consider this an indispensable part of strategic peacemaking.

The endorsement of political leaderships will generate the needed energy to renew and strengthen the already existing efforts in this regard. The Israeli public need to hear the voices of average occupants of Palestinian towns on their fears, and Palestinians

must hear Israeli fears, either directly, or through a major media campaign. Each needs to understand the life situation of the other.

5. JUSTICE, INQUIRIES INTO WHAT HAPPENED

It is hard to overestimate the importance of perceptions of injustice in conflict. Whatever the composition of governmental or non-governmental inquiries, it is critical to pursue a just and fair evaluation of what went wrong and who committed what excesses in the last month. If any international body manages to do this in a truly unprejudiced fashion it will help the process of recovery. The problem is that that most inquiring bodies are prejudiced by their pre-conceptions about the parties to the conflict, rather than an honest evaluation of the behavior of conflicting parties. The latter, however, would be a healthy contribution to creating a cultural foundation for a peace process based on justice.

Most importantly, the justice claims, and the rage emerging from a sense of injustice on the part of average Palestinians must become a part of the acknowledgments that will accompany the peace process. We cannot move forward without a better venue for the channeling of this rage at injustice. There are also a great number of people on the Israeli side who feel and claim a deep posture of injury due to injustice from Palestinians and, more generally, the Arab world. We may need to think about the establishment of some ongoing justice and reconciliation commission through which many of these issues can be addressed.

6. HIGH LEVEL RELIGIOUS MEETINGS, STATEMENTS, AND GESTURES

These are already underway, at least inside of Israel and in various settings globally, but not between Israel and Palestine. Furthermore, whatever efforts that have been made have not been endorsed, promoted, or even permitted by some of the political

leadership. It is vital that the political leaderships be pressured to consider this vital to the peace process. This should include not only statements about a common monotheistic commitment to peace, justice, and the value of human life, for example, but also a concerted efforts to make religious gestures that demonstrate these values to the enemy. The key missing ingredient has been the permission by political leaderships to pursue this avenue seriously. And the latter have not received the proper international signals that this is vital.

7. THE SHIFT FROM THE CULTURE OF MILITARY FORCE TO POLICE FORCE, TRAINING

That there is a very large amount of guns available on either side of this conflict is a given. Clearly the Israelis have available the ability to escalate to much larger weapons such as gunships, and have an extensive capacity for self-protection which has led to relatively few casualties despite the large amount of firepower directed at them. The critical need of the hour, however, is to re-establish a culture of policing, with all the responsibilities and sensitivities that this would require. Furthermore, it is vital that we do not return to the status quo ante, as if this were an acceptable situation. Clearly it was not acceptable to the majority on the Palestinian side who have been moved to such massive violence. The status quo ante involved a great deal of bad policing, and utter insensitivity to basic issues of cultural and human dignity.

We suggest an extensive training process that will be mandated for both sides of the conflict as to policing methods, the proper and proportional use of force, and methods of conflict prevention that emphasize cultural sensitivity and the utilization of cultural assets in the maintenance of peace or its restoration in the post-conflict setting. I already have some enthusiastic commitment to this at least by one division of the Palestinian police. But nothing will occur unless the leaderships on both sides are

pressured by the international community of negotiators to consider this a vital step of peacebuilding.

8. THE POOR

Abject misery drives this conflict, as it does many others. Cultural and religious sensibilities around the world are really at the mercy of the damage that human misery wreaks on individual and collective identities. The disappointment with the peace process is substantially attributable to this. The poor have been pawns of one side of the conflict, and been utterly and callously ignored by the other side. It is vital to understand how much of the rejectionist politics on both sides receives its impetus from the relative deprivation of poor communities. No peace process should move forward at a high level in the future without a parallel process of anti-poverty measures that are high profile and that lead to immediate, stage by stage results in the lives of people who are being asked to agree to the peace process. The current methods of anti-poverty associated with the peace process have been far too abstract, focused on infrastructure and subject to high levels of corruption that further alienated the majority from the peace process. We suggest small loans to large numbers of people, for example, rather than large loans to the few. We suggest employment training available on some level to every young person. We suggest this on both sides of the Green Line, and it is critical that its ongoing efforts be directly and publicly associated with the peace process. There is ample international experience with grass roots, popular anti-poverty and development work. It needs, however, the endorsement of the highest levels of leadership for both financial and cultural reasons. It is a critical way to make the peace process also a justice process.

Mechanisms to include in some way the poorest refugee families in the Palestinian Diaspora would not only extend the justice process it would be a powerful symbol of

where the final status negotiations are heading. Too many of the benefits of peace are being held for the very end, and it has become clear that there is no longer any patience for this. It was never a good idea. Ways must be found now to create a parallel kind of progress in the human and cultural realm to the relative political and military gains thus far.

9. HONOR

The valuation of human dignity and human life has been the greatest victim of this century of Israeli/Palestinian conflict. The majority on both sides feel intuitively that their enemies and even the rest of the world do not particularly value their existence. As a later stage of this de-escalation it is crucial that the political leaderships on both sides be pressured to find symbolic ways to honor the culture and identity of the other side. They must encourage their communities to do the same. In so doing they will put in motion opposite of a spiral of violence. Just as there are powerful spirals of violence that spin out of control there are often spirals of reconciliation that can take place with the proper encouragement from leaders.