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Community Dialogue to Bridge Gaps Between the Arab States and Israel

BY ISMAIL SAYYID AHMAD

Dialogue has to be direct; people who have been enemies need to summon the courage to look one another in the eyes, to touch each other's hands, to hear each other's voices." If you need more to fill the space, add, "Each and every person can and must be an ambassador for peaceful coexistence

Community dialogue between the peoples of the MENA region is a key means to reducing tensions and promoting coexistence in peace and tranquility. The absence of dialogue has helped a variety of both internal and external actors—from secular ideologues and fundamentalist Islamic groups within to superpower agitprop malefactors from without—to inflame and

prolong regional conflicts, not least those between Arab states and the State of Israel. For seventy years such actors have misrepresented reality and bent truth for parochial purposes. By so doing they have exacerbated old fears and sowed new ones, willfully lighting fuses of political and religious crises that have cumulatively wrecked the region, taken countless innocent lives, and condemned new generations to battle artificial burdens no young people should have to suffer.

We must replace the remaining forces of negativity that keep peoples apart with a new power of engagement. To do that, we should keep seven basic pillars of peaceful construction in mind: security, justice, reconciliation, social and economic

welfare, and integration.

Think of these pillars as mechanisms for cooperative construction among the peoples of the region. Each one holds the power to transcend old divisions with the promise of new mutual benefits. Only when people can conceive of values and aspirations in common can they see that acceptance of the “other” is necessary for their own progress. Only then can a vision of post-conflict societies working together seem real. Human beings, alas, are simple creatures; they cannot work for a future they cannot imagine. These seven pillars—security, justice, reconciliation, social and economic welfare, participation, and integration—are the building blocks of that imagination.

Transcending the Urge to Harm

To build a new shared imagination for a better future, people need to engage each other. It is no good just sitting alone and dreaming. Dialogue is the sine qua non to stand up our seven pillars. It is the method by which shared aspirations for the future can overcome the hurt of the past.

Dialogue within fractured societies can sweep away polarization. Dialogue between Arabs and the Israelis can replace old stereotypes with an awareness of the sincerity and dignity of those whose experiences have shaped different views. Dialogue cannot erase conflict, but it can humanize it. It can show former enemies that only peaceful means can light the way forward. It can prove that restraint is the greatest form of strength.

Dialogue has to start with a willingness to recognize and respect the unconditional humanity of the other. Dialogue has to be direct; people who have been enemies need to summon the courage to look one another in the eyes, to touch each other’s hands, to hear each other’s voices. Only creative human interaction can build new social realities, and to refuse such interaction is to say, in effect, that one’s own civilization has nothing to contribute to the collective future. No one thinks of his own civilization that way; everyone thinks, rightly, that for others to better appreciate “our” ways can only help them. When everyone learns to see their own quiet pride manifest also in others a spirit of

tolerance and good will flower among all peoples.

We tend to think of differences as pairs of opposites instead of the complements they really are. The great religious, ethno-linguistic, and cultural diversity of the Middle East and North Africa constitutes one of region’s most precious gifts. But here is the trick: in order to receive that gift its peoples need to be willing to share it. After all, everyone knows that separate pieces of fabric cannot a tent make.

How to start? We are wise to build up our seven pillars by stressing engagement on those grounds that are most clearly universal. Almost everyone loves music, so we must make and enjoy music together. Almost everyone enjoys sport, so we must hold athletic festivals. Everyone loves good food, so we must cook and eat together. Everyone appreciates at least one fine-art or craft form—sculpture, painting, tiling, glass-blowing, and so on—so we must make and present art together. Every society cherishes its young and respects its elderly, so we should convene to share best practices for caring and healing. To wit, we must begin with what is common to our humanity and join to exalt it.

If we do that well, and if we patiently build up to a threshold of trust by so doing, then we can expand our range of tools to foster regional integration more broadly.

Then civil society organizations can join together in seminars, workshops, and ultimately action-oriented projects to directly address conflict resolution within and among countries. Then we can aspire to practical projects on mutual security and both economic and social development. The least positive result will help build up further the pillars of reconciliation and integration. The least result, too, will encourage more participation, which amounts essentially to the social democratization of problem-solving. The pillars will rise interdependently, and the structure they ultimately support will be as beautiful as it is strong. In the dust below will lie the useless shards of our will to harm others.

It is remarkable how quickly and how avidly people can work together when they come to share in building something fine. It is remarkable how

quickly they can forget what used to keep them sulkily apart. But for that to happen the exercise of an optimistic imagination pointing to common aspirations must arise. That takes enlightened leadership from within and, often, support from without. And we have learned the hard way what happens when that leadership and support go wanting.

While optimism is a force multiplier, pessimism is often a self-fulfilling nightmare. Unfortunately, a conflict mindset has burrowed deeply into our midst. More than any other region in the world, the Middle East and North Africa have come to be associated with conflict and carnage. Outsiders see our homes as engulfed in a continuous war zone, where the most notable feature of diversity is the tenebrous pallet of the ways we hate one another. The view inside the region is too often not much different, and our pessimism is in some ways our heaviest burden.

We must change the region's image by changing the reality that underlies it, and we know how to do that. The key is that civil society, despite its own occasional warts, must nudge, guide, or peaceably force the arm of sometimes hidebound, risk-averse, and narrowly motivated governments. A wide range of dialogic engagement techniques exists to transform regional views towards existing conflicts. Some are suitable for ameliorating civil and sectarian strife, others for building bridges of trust among peoples. But all depend on broad participation, shared decision-making, and keeping firmly in view the lodestars of common, mutually beneficial goals.

Away from the Boiling Point

Just as builders of a shared regional culture of optimism and mutuality are wise to begin with universal values, conflict resolvers must carefully delineate the challenges to be overcome. It is better to succeed at overcoming modest or "ripe" problems, or aspects of them, than to prematurely tilt against the hardest ones and fail. As the pillars are built up interdependently, the challenges must fall to solution in pragmatic order.

Seven issues combine today to perpetuate or shape conflict in the MENA region:

1. The multipartite Arab-Israeli conflict, and its shifting security ramifications throughout and beyond the region.
2. The Iranian Revolution, which has fomented and politicised sectarianism among Arab and Muslim communities worldwide.
3. The so-called Arab Spring revolutions starting in 2011 that, on balance, destabilized many societies and provoked ongoing harsh authoritarian backlashes in some.
4. The manipulation of local conflicts, in places like Syria, Libya, and Yemen among others, by actors within and beyond the region for their own parochial advantage, which has had the general effect of making local problems larger by dragging in additional actors from near and far.
5. A related escalation in the arms race among regional states, which distorts economic life and threatens social stability.
6. The norming of terrorism as a mode of struggle, thanks mainly to the initiatives of Islamic fundamentalist groups, which has bequeathed to the region a very unhelpful pariah status in the eyes of the world as a whole.
7. The reinforcement of shunning norms, as for example through regional and international organizations that call for a boycott of Israel, that aim to criminalize dealings with any opponent and that promote the radical separation of cultures, economies, and peoples.

Overcoming these issues obviously presents difficulties for policymakers as well as for civil society actors. The least we can do is work to prevent things from getting even worse, from reaching a true boiling point. So we must exude optimism. We must stimulate imaginations and encourage participation.

We must deploy mutual respect to build trust within and among peoples. We must keep the seven pillars clearly in sight, for people need to have before them a small number of worthy objectives to focus their energies. We must wisely prioritise the steps we must take to build positive momentum, and shrewdly prioritise our seven challenge targets to muster an optic of inevitable success. We must be patient and intrepid, brave and humble at the same time.

Toward Coexistence Through Dialogue

Above all, perhaps, we must be relentlessly clear about our aim, which is not a utopian fantasy of a region without conflict. Conflict is baked into human social nature; but so is cooperation. Our aim is no fantasy. It is the realistic demand for peaceful coexistence, which a civilized politics, domestic and international, under the rule of law can enable in the Middle East as it has in other parts of the world.

Coexistence is the central concept for the proper management of diversity. We can get a sense of this by noting the etymology of the Arabic word “ta’ayashu”, meaning “they lived together amicably”. The concept posits a reciprocal partnership between two or more different parties that share some values but not others. The formula for living together amicably is to elevate what is shared above what is not, and of course implementing that formula itself is the master value that must be held in common for coexistence to work.

Clearly, then, coexistence conceived as a process rather than as an outcome demands common space for mutual expression and recognition among different parties. Coexistence can never be mute. It must be sounded out to be affirmed. In a sense, coexistence is embodied by the multiple forms of dialogue that compose it.

It is impossible to know beforehand how the initial engagement of adversaries will go. Techniques of depolarization do exist, but they are more guidelines than formulas. But one thing is certain: no engagement, no progress. No engagement, no correction of the misconceptions and

and misunderstandings that keep people apart and on the cusp of violence. No engagement, no chance to allow respect its day and trust its harvest. No engagement, no way to identify and banish the many methods of exclusion, marginalization, and hatred that keep so many people in thrall to the vultures of selfishness that to this day still loom over the region.

Who will promote the dialogue the region needs? It is not necessary for civil actors to start from scratch: Serious efforts have already begun in this realm, thanks to myriad Arab, Israeli, and Western organizations. In the Gulf states, for example, recent years have seen the birth of dialogue projects under the King Hamad Center for Tolerance in Bahrain and the Ministry of Tolerance in the UAE, as well as the expansion of Saudi Arabia’s King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue. In the United States, a remarkable organization named Kivunim — devoted to “Building World Consciousness” — has formed a network of human bonds through youth dialogue, spanning America’s Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities; Arab North Africa; Israel; and elsewhere. And both in Israel and the Palestinian areas, interfaith NGOs have begun to bring people together on the basis of their common humanity and shared faith in the oneness of God. A world of untold possibility lies in store for these and other initiatives. I believe that Arab countries farther afield, long considered off-limits to international networks of bridge-building, will soon become a part of them.

Each and every person can be an ambassador for peaceful coexistence. Everyone can resolve to open a dialogue with someone of a different faith community, a different native tongue, a different country, a different culture—and there are many ways to pursue that dialogue. Indeed, the revolution of hope in our collective future has to rise within each person. We, individually and collectively, must be the change.

Journalist and activist Ismail Sayyid Ahmad is a member of the Sudanese Journalists Syndicate in Khartoum. He writes for leading Sudanese, Gulf, and pan-Arab newspapers, including Asharq Alawsat, Al-Hayat, and Al-Siyasa.



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