

Nov 04, 2016 by **Rob Asghar**

Candor and Conflict ^[1]

Writer Usama Hussein recently reported on an increase in both anti-Semitic and Islamophobic attacks in the United Kingdom, including one attack against a London synagogue and one on the daughter of a Muslim leader in London. The fact that such violence came after flare-ups in Gaza showed many nations that a top public diplomacy priority involves facilitating real dialogue, within and beyond their borders, among Jews and Muslims. Indeed, tensions and misunderstandings between those groups form a spider's web that spans the globe.

Many anti-Western resentments in the Islamic world stem from a notion that certain powers of the West -- mainly America and secondarily some nations perceived as lackeys of America -- are anti-Arab, anti-Muslim, and entirely tilted toward the concerns of Israelis rather than to the plight of occupied Palestinians.

This sense that the world's most powerful players are unfair in mediating the Israeli-Palestinian conflict serves as the rocket fuel for the engine of Muslim anger toward Western governments. In this context, any amount of Western developmental aid or political assistance could only backfire, in that it could be dismissed as more intervention by meddling superpowers.

This anger did not appear to exist a few decades ago, when an Eisenhower or Kissinger was viewed as a less "biased" player by the Arab and Muslim world. Back then, the Muslim world felt greater envy and less resentment toward America; today the ratio has reversed.

A central irony is that the success of pro-Israeli commentators in shaping American foreign-policy discourse may be counterproductive to the long-term hopes of those supporters. *The Daily Show's* Jon Stewart lampooned the matter here. As he joked last summer about American presidential candidates' unwillingness to critique the policy of America's main friend in the Middle East: "Oh, I forgot -- you can't say anything remotely critical of Israel and still get elected president. Which is funny, because you know where you can criticize Israel? Uh... Israel."

Stewart says out loud, as a Jewish-American, what many Muslims around the world are whining about, especially as they watch an Obama seem to morph himself to convince voters that he's not as sympathetic to Palestinians as he may seem. The irony is that Muslims -- educated and less educated alike -- find themselves repeating the dangerous and misguided mantra, "See, the Jews really do run the world."

(Bernard Lewis, often considered a critic of the modern Muslim world, makes a fascinating point in noting that modern anti-Semitism among Muslims was imported from a Europe that itself needed centuries to dispose of it. Many in the West would be fascinated to see how the seemingly most inflammatory statements from the Muslim world involve an awestruck sense of jealousy about how the Jewish community can influence Western thinking so much better

than Arabs can.)

The solution involves candor and listening, to a greater degree than what ideologues in various camps can currently tolerate. Muslims on the whole are woefully uneducated about how hard it has been for Jews, even in post-Holocaust years, to live their lives free of intimidation and harassment. Few know how prestigious American clubs and neighborhoods excluded Jews well after the founding of Israel - a reality that eats away at one common myth that Jews forced America to facilitate Israel's creation.

The conspiratorial notion that Jews run the world, the media, Hollywood, reflects a larger culture of victimization reform within the Muslim world; reforming that victimization mentality will do much to alleviate obsessions with real or perceived slights to Palestinians. In the meantime, the press, pols and populaces in Muslim nations do not realize or appreciate the manner in which they trigger Israeli supporters fears for the existential threat that faces such a tiny nation at all times.

There is also the difficult issue of clarifying what the “Jewish voice” is within cross-cultural and cross-national dialogue. As Stewart indicated, you will see much more candid critiques of Israeli policy within the pages of Haaretz than the Chicago Tribune. Yet as you can see from the comments section from his video, Stewart himself was taken to task as a “self-hating Jew” who feeds into the anti-Semitism of others.

Thankfully, Jewish Americans in organizations such as J Street are increasingly committed to serving Israel's long-term interests by not paralyzing the candor that would be needed to sort through the relations among Israel, the West, the Palestinians, Arabs and Muslims elsewhere.

We are seeing promising steps. The U.S. State Department has been bringing Muslim students from Egypt and Indonesia on exchange programs that allow them to interact with American Jewish peers. They learn from one another and identify common ground, common values and common dreams.

At USC, the Center for Muslim-Jewish Engagement (CMJE), housed within the university's Center for Religion and Civic Culture, has been working on establishing unique academic resources illuminating the evolution of the interaction of these two Abrahamic faiths. The CMJE is also sponsoring a seminar on USC's campus in late April. And USC's Office of Religious Life is sponsoring an event later this month at which Reza Aslan will deliver a keynote address, “Understanding the Judeo-Christian-Islamic Tradition.”

These are all small but firm steps on the thousand-mile PD journey – a journey toward not just solutions for Israelis and Palestinians, but toward dissolving the toxic anger and misunderstanding that forms that globe-spanning spider's web.
