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Who will play God in the Middle East? The path to long-term peace is through three paradigm shifts... (originally published as a blog for the World Future Society)

By Michael Lee

What happens in the Middle East reverberates across the world. There lie the roots and holiest historical places of the three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. There lies the frontier between East and West. And much of the world's remaining oil is found in this prized and disputed region.

For many reasons, the current conflict in Israel and Gaza is of global significance. At yesterday's news conference, the grim faces of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, his defence minister and the head of the IDF, spoke volumes as they vowed to continue the fight against terrorism and negate the twin threats of missiles overhead and secret tunnels underground. With over 1,100 fatalities for Palestinians and 50 for Israel, a helpless sense of international outrage is growing.

A state of fear and paranoia prevails on both sides, fed by decades of mutual distrust, hatred and the painful wounds of past conflict. Paranoia and fear magnify perceived threats and lead to disproportionate reactions.

As the great man and genius, Albert Einstein, who was a Zionist in his beliefs, showed the world, a problem can't be solved using the same logic which created it in the first place.

But what new logic could point the way to peace in the Middle East?

Before looking at three paradigm shifts which would kick-start a long and slow move towards a future state beyond war, let's first retrace the timeline of the immediate crisis. Just looking at the sequence of events in the cold light of day reveals an exceptionally rapid escalation of violence. The speed at which this deterioration happened, in turn, indicates profound levels of distrust.

The prevailing fear has undoubtedly been heightened by the menace of the secret tunnels leading into Israel. It's thought by some commentators that the success of the Iron Dome anti-missile system in intercepting rockets fired from Gaza has proved to be a game-changer, causing Hamas militants to spend roughly \$30 million to pour 600,000 tons of cement and other materials into the ground to build about three dozen underground corridors.¹

The trigger event for the escalation of conflict was the abduction and murder of three young Israeli hitchhikers, Eyal Yifrach, Naftali Fraenkel and Gil-Ad Shaer, on June 12th. They were last seen at 10 pm that night at Alon Shvut Junction. 25 minutes later, one of the teenage boys sent a harrowing message to a police emergency hotline to report the kidnapping.

Their bodies were recovered by a search team in an open field near Khirbet Aranava, just north of Hebron, on June 30th. Crudely, the ambulance carrying the three bodies was attacked by rioters but did not lose control and managed to complete its journey.

Following the abduction, the IDF and police conducted a huge manhunt and series of raids, resulting in mass arrests, detentions, confiscations and some violent clashes.

Then, on July 2nd, a day after the burial of three murdered Israeli teens, Mohammed Abu Khdeir, a 16-year-old Palestinian, was kidnapped by nationalist extremists in East Jerusalem and murdered, probably by being burnt alive.

It was not long before full-scale warfare had broken out, with widespread rocket fire from Gaza into Israel and air strikes from the Israeli Air Force on Gaza, followed by the on-going ground offensive.

By July 26th, during a 12-hour humanitarian ceasefire, the Independent newspaper had reported that the death toll had exceeded 1,000, mostly on the Palestinian side.²

In addition, the number of wounded is around 5,700, with tens of thousands more people displaced. The social and economic toll of this conflict will be severe.

Each one of these deaths, starting with the barbaric triple abduction and murder on June 12th, is very sad and painful to bear for many people, as well as of concern to observers in the international community.

Looking at the numbers within this time-frame, it has been an extreme response to a brutal crime. One problem is that a crime, however politically motivated, was dealt with militarily and politically rather than being treated as a primarily police matter. A murder investigation and manhunt turned almost overnight into a crackdown on Hamas.

¹ According to army spokesman Lieutenant-Colonel Peter Lerner – see Calev Ben-David's excellent report "Secret Tunnels Under Israel Reveal Threat From Gaza" in Bloomberg News July 27, 2014 -

<http://www.businessweek.com/news/2014-07-27/secret-tunnels-under-israel-reveal-intricate-threat-from-gaza>
² <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/israelhamas-ceasefire-at-least-60-bodies-found-in-gaza-after-12hour-truce-begins-9630309.html> Israel-Gaza conflict: Death toll hits 1,000 amid 12-hour ceasefire, 26 July 2014.

Having retraced the steps that led up to yesterday's news conference, let's return to talk of future peace. Peace is really another word for a scarce and infinitely precious resource called security.

Here are three paradigm shifts that would help create a logic for peace in the Middle East:

Paradigm 1: the assumption of shared spiritual equality

The state and people of Israel, and their supporters, need to see, accept and believe that the lives of Palestinian people are equal in worth, preciousness and importance to Israeli lives. This is the paradigm of Israelis and the Palestine people, Jews and Gentiles, being equal in the eyes of God from a spiritual, religious and ethical point of view.

Those who do not accept this truth of spiritual and morality equality seem to me to be prisoners to racial or religious prejudice, cultivating the dangerous seeds of hatred and distrust of one's neighbours.

Paradigm 2: the right of Israel to exist securely

The leaders and people of Gaza, and their supporters, need to see, accept and believe that Israel has the historical and international right to exist and enjoy the normal security of any country. This state is not going anywhere, not now and not in the long-term future.

Those who do not accept this right of Israel to exist securely are living in a fantasy world of twisted, a-historical logic.

Paradigm 3: the right of the Palestinian people to security

The Palestinian population needs constitutional protection as part of their right to security and sustainability as a nation and a people.

Those who reject these three paradigms can only hope for continued bloodshed and conflict in the region, including innocent blood of children and civilians.

Faced with the prospect of a seemingly unavoidable blood bath in South Africa after he was released from prison, Nelson Mandela masterminded the peaceful transition to racial reconciliation and democracy in the so-called miracle of 1994. He understood the need for deep-seated national paradigm shifts and for forgiveness to replace the zero-sum game of endlessly apportioning blame for past wrongs.

Such forgiveness and paradigm shifts across Israel and Gaza would only be the beginning. Those who accept these three paradigms would form a growing middle ground, eventually large enough to marginalize bloody-minded extremists and other irrational and paranoid entities on either side of the current divide. These switches in logic are within the capacity of all reasonable human beings in the region. These paradigms would stop the demonization of Israelis by Palestinians and the demonization of Palestinians by Israelis. It would become a force strong enough to stem the deadly historical polarization.

And it all starts with the simple spiritual insight that no human should ever be treated as sub-human.

Based on this insight and on the three core paradigms, the following seem to be reasonable conclusions.

- There was a disproportionate military response to the trigger event, with ensuing conflict resulting in a considerably higher death-toll for Palestinians than Israelis
- The secret tunnels between Gaza and Israel must be closed down for good as they violate the principle of Israel's right to a secure existence
- The Palestinian people deserve the same level of security and human dignity as Israelis
- Peace will need to come through the eventual demilitarization of both sides of the conflict as economic and cultural ties are slowly built up along with fundamental constitutional security

Hating your neighbour is a really, really bad idea, especially in the Middle East.

But who will play God and start showing forgiveness, love and respect for their neighbours? Only then can the economic, cultural and civic bridge-building happen in the middle ground to cultivate longer term trust, understanding and cooperation between Israel and the Palestinians.

Twenty years ago, peace happened against all odds in South Africa. Is there the will for a similar miracle in the Middle East?