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The Palestinian Way

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"Do the Palestinians matter?" This is the question that the Trump Administration is asking itself. And one can be sure that when Prime Minister Netanyahu met with President Trump, he told the President that the Palestinians really are not very important. It is likely he said to the new President, "Look at the region. There is Syria. There is Isis. There is Iran." Further, he would have pointed to the growing cooperation between Israel and many of the Arab states and said, "They don't even matter to the Arab states." And in saying all this, he would have connected with much that Mr. Trump may already believe.

Trump, like most of the other candidates for the Republican Presidential nomination regularly denounced President Obama for declining to say that the enemy the U.S. faces is "Radical Islamic Terrorism." On the campaign, Trump repeatedly emphasized these words: "Radical Islamic Terrorism." He repeatedly called on Obama to name the enemy, saying, "If you don't even name it, how can you fight it?" The Obama Administration's reluctance to use this phrase did not mean that it was unconcerned about the terrorist threat to the United States posed by groups that try to justify horrible acts by a distorted interpretation of Islam. After the 9-11 attack on the World Trade Towers, no American is without concern that something like that, or worse, could happen again.

The core difference between Obama and Trump is that Obama did not want to use a phrase that could play into the hands of Isis or Al Qaeda. He did not want to advance their goal of **creating** a worldwide conflict between Islam and the West. He did not believe there is a "War of Civilizations" and he did not want to contribute to that way of understanding the world.

President Trump has no such hesitations, as we can see from his travel ban against citizens from seven Moslem countries, a ban he announced despite warnings that this would be a recruiting poster for Isis. The Trump outlook appears to be that we are already in a War of Civilizations. The Obama outlook is that we are not, that we don't want to be, and we don't have to be.

One way or the other, however, the War of Civilizations idea is quite central to American policy debates. So the question arises: "Do the Palestinians have any importance in relationship to the so-called "War of Civilizations"?"

My answer is "Yes," the Palestinians have a great deal to do with whether or not such a global conflict between Islam and the West ever takes hold. There are two main connections. First, one must understand that within the United States, support for Israel, for the existence of a Jewish state has very deep roots. It goes back

hundreds of years, pre-dating the modern Zionist movement, which emerged in the late 19th Century. The Protestant-Christian settlers who came to America in the 17th Century strongly viewed the Hebrew Bible as part of their Holy Scripture, and they identified with the story of the ancient Israelites exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land. They saw themselves as building the "City on the Hill" - the New Jerusalem. When Harvard was established as the first college in North America in 1636, the study of Hebrew was an essential part of the curriculum. In 1819, John Adams, the second President of the United States wrote "I really wish the Jews again in Judea an independent nation." Adams looked forward to the idea that an independent nation of Jews would, in time, become Christians. In this, his outlook connects with current day Evangelical Christians who are some of the most right-wing supporters of Israel in the United States.

The point of this is that for many of those who believe we are in a War of Civilizations, this is a war between a Judeo-Christian civilization on the one side and Islam on the other. But if this is their perspective, then it puts in a new light the Arab Peace Initiative and its endorsement by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. From a War of Civilizations perspective, the Arab Peace Initiative must be seen as **an offer of peace between the two civilizations**. Thus, because of their great symbolic meaning, achieving peace between Israel and Palestine is not irrelevant to the War of Civilizations; rather, it is the key to ending (or avoiding) that war. The central question today is whether Israel (the West) will agree to this offer of peace between the civilizations.

Secondly, there is what I would call **The Palestinian Way**, and by this I mean the existence of a distinctive Palestinian approach to these matters that can not only contribute to peace between two civilizations, but offers a bridge between them. One of the places that one finds this distinctive Palestinian Way is in the opening words of the Palestinian Declaration of Independence when it says, "Palestine, the land of the three monotheistic faiths." This self-definition of Palestine in relationship to Judaism, Christianity and Islam rejects those who divide the word between Judeo-Christian civilization and Islam. It is followed in the Declaration two paragraphs later by saying of the Palestinian people that they have been "Nourished by an unfolding series of civilizations." This is a totally different way of thinking about the relationships between the civilizations, and its impact on the Palestinian people. The image is one of nourishment, of human development, not of war. These words reflect the perspective of Mamoud Darwish who drafted the Declaration of Independence and once said, "All cultures, all civilizations in history have come to Palestine, and I believe I have the right to this whole inheritance." In claiming this "whole inheritance" Darwish was saying that as a proud Palestinian the multiplicity of civilizations is a precious part of his inner being.

The Palestinian Way also has a social and political dimension. For those in the United States who believe in the War of Civilizations, they see on the one side societies that are committed to democracy, to individual rights, to tolerance and to equality for women, and on the other side, societies that give ultimate authority not

to the people, but to religious leaders who claim to speak for God, and that are intolerant of other perspectives, disdainful of individual rights, and oppressive of women. But if this is the great divide, then the potential of the State of Palestine is that it will offer a distinctive Palestinian Way: a religious, dominantly Moslem society, that at the same time is deeply democratic, embraces freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion and the equality of women. The future State of Palestine will offer this Palestinian Way as a model for Moslem societies.

So, do the Palestinian matter? Do they matter with respect to the big questions that have seized the world? Indeed they do! They not only matter but they offer hope and solutions to the conflicts and tensions that divide us. The world does not see this world-significant role of the Palestinians; the challenge is to make this potential visible to all.

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