

Collection of Articles

By Professor Mohammed S. Dajani

Teaching Our Children Islam's True Message

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Mohammed Dajani Daoudi

In my two visits to Auschwitz, the Nazi concentration camp in Poland, I learned that holocausts and genocides do not occur in a vacuum. Rather, there is almost always a vicious campaign of incitement directed against the target group preceding them. What is troubling today, with the recent uptick in anti-Semitic and Islamophobic incidents worldwide, is that extremists and zealots are not the only ones inciting their followers. In a number of Arab countries, Muslim children are taught ideas that distort the true meaning of the Quran and hadith too.

In the Prophet Mohammed's last address, known as the "Farewell Sermon," he said, "I leave behind two things, the Quran and the sunnah, and if you follow both you will never go astray." However, this straightforward message is complicated by what is known as tafsir, or Quranic exegesis. Certain Islamic scriptural interpretations continue to pose problems Does the Quran promote hatred, enmity, and violence, or does it preach peace, moderation, reconciliation, and tolerance, as asserted by moderate Muslim scholars, including Abdul Rahman ibn Nasir as-Sa'di, Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, and Abu Muhammad al-Baghawi?

For example, some clerics teach young Muslims that the Quran describes Jews as pigs and apes, citing two verses from Surat al-Ma'ida in which God punished Sabbath breakers by turning them into pigs and apes. But a more truthful reading of these verses reveals that God's punishment was reserved only for individual transgressors, not the entire Jewish people. In other words, contrary to popular misperception, the Quran does not describe Jews as pigs and apes.

Similarly, a widely quoted hadith reads, "A Jew serving the Prophet got sick. The Prophet went to visit him and urged him: 'Become a Muslim.' The Jew looked at his father who instructed him, 'Obey the Prophet.' The Jew became a Muslim and the Prophet left saying: 'Thank God who saved him from Hell.'" Some exegetes point to this hadith to conclude that Jews are destined to go to Hell, but the Quran makes no mention of such a fate for Jews.

The most widespread of the Prophet's hadiths concerning Jews is the following: "The Day of Judgment will not arrive until the Muslims fight the Jews and the Muslims will kill them. Even if a Jew

hides behind a rock or a tree, the rock or the tree will say: 'O Muslim, O worshipper of God! There is a Jew behind me. Come and kill him, except the Salt Bush, for it is one of the Jews' trees.'" This hadith is taught across the Muslim world, including in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, Egypt, and Palestine, and it continues to shape the attitudes of Muslims toward Jews. Yet this hadith directly contradicts a slew of Quranic verses, which take precedence over the hadith when there are textual ambiguities or conflicting content. The Quran explicitly asserts in Surat al-Hajj, "God will judge between you on the Day of Judgment concerning the matters in which you differ," commanding that only God can be the final arbiter on matters of ultimate truth. Moreover, the Quran contains many verses that describe Jews favorably, none of which instruct Muslims to fight them. Surat al-Baqara, for instance, contains the same verse twice that reads, "Children of Israel, remember the blessing I have bestowed upon you, and that I have exalted you above the nations."

Islam did not come to negate the Old and New Testaments, but rather to confirm and corroborate them. The Quran is replete with examples of respect for Christians and Jewish scriptures; it often emphasizes the shared values of the three Abrahamic religions. This is further demonstrated in the Constitution of Medina, a pact signed by the Jews of Medina and the Prophet when he emigrated there in 622. This transformative piece of legislation united the two communities and accepted the differences between the two religions.

Islam offers both Christians and Jews a broad scope of religious freedoms and protections, and minority rights are also considered a religious and moral obligation. In one hadith, the Prophet warned, "Beware! Whoever is cruel and hard on a non-Muslim minority, or curtails their rights, or burdens them with more than they can bear, or takes anything from them against their free will; I will complain against that person on the Day of Judgment."

The Quran urges Muslims to invite non-Muslims into a "respectful" and "gentle" dialogue on religious matters, with "wisdom and beautiful preaching." When disagreement or acrimony begin to prevail, the Quran in Surat al-Kafirun instructs Muslims to say, "For you is your religion, and for me is my religion," and in Surat al-Kahf, "And say, the truth is from your Lord, so whoever wills—let him believe; and whoever wills—let him disbelieve." This is what our children and youth ought to learn.

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Reconciliation in the Midst of Conflict

February 24, 2015

Mohammed Dajani Daoudi

When I used to give lectures about the concept of *wasatia*, the Arabic word for moderation, Palestinian audiences would persistently ask two questions: Why should Islam be moderate to please the West and the United States? And how would moderation end the occupation? These are two important questions that must be accurately and convincingly answered.

In response to the first question, I would cite verses from the Quran that urge believers to be moderate in all aspects of life and note that the Prophet Muhammad's *sunna* – his actions and sayings – exemplified moderation, tolerance, and forgiveness.

The second question is more challenging. Palestinians are living in the midst of a protracted conflict and suffer on a daily basis from a harsh military occupation, despairing political instability, poor governance, social unrest, and worsening economic conditions. This is compounded by daily headlines of Israeli land expropriation, indiscriminate imprisonment, restrictions on movement, and human rights violation. How can I answer this question without sounding unrealistic or too idealistic?

Radicalism and religious extremism have been on the rise in the last decade. They intoxicate Palestinians, offering them an escape from their wretched reality. For many, logic and objectivity simply do not resonate anymore. As one Palestinian imam in Ramallah told me, “When in my Friday sermon I talk about ethics and religious values, I find later that the worshipers have slipped away to another mosque where the imam delivers a passionate political speech in his Friday sermon in which he attacks Israel and its U.S. ally, and describing Christians and Jews as infidels whom Muslims should not even greet or welcome them in their homes. What should I do? Preach to myself? Preach to an empty mosque?”

In order to broaden the appeal of the Wasatia movement, it is important to talk to the public in a language they revere and respect: the language of the Quran. We can break down barriers and engage even the most recalcitrant critics with the Quran's peaceful and humane message.

Moderation is not an exclusively Islamic concept. So the goal of the Wasatia movement is twofold: to unite the Muslim community and to build bridges of reconciliation with other religious groups.

Moderation will allow for reconciliation in the midst of conflict, which would lead to a life of cooperation, prosperity, and eventually conflict resolution.

The word *wasatia* comes from the Arabic root *wasat*. Linguistically, the word means “center,” but religiously, it denotes justice, tolerance, temperance, and centrism. The term is mentioned in the Quran more than once, such as in Surat al-Baqarah, verse 143, which reads: “And thus We have made you *ummatah wasatan* [a moderate nation].” Its core tenets – liberty, equality, and fraternity – are foundational religious values which carry significant social and political implications. Some of the social values that emerge from these fundamental principles in Islam include those emphasizing *ta’aruf* (knowing one another), *ta’awun* (cooperation), and *takamul* (complementarity and completion).

To address the question of how moderation leads to end of occupation, my response is simple: it will help Israelis and Palestinians realize the overlap in their desires. Israelis, concerned with personal and national security, will see the neighboring Palestinian community as a moderate culture seeking a better life for family. Similarly, Palestinians will see the Israelis as seeking peace and security in order to secure a prosperous future for their society. As such, the *raison d’être* for occupation fades away.

Both the Islamic and Jewish traditions fully support the concept of reconciliation; there is justification for the peace process in the texts of both faiths. Thus we need to work with, not against, each other; we must perceive the other not as an enemy in conflict, but a partner in peace. Perhaps a good starting point would be mutual recognition. Israel could recognize Palestine as a member state of the United Nations, and Palestine could acknowledge Israel within the 1967 borders as a homeland for the Jewish people. Israel could free Palestinian prisoners, and Palestinians could end incitement and their calls for anti-normalization.

We must ask ourselves, which agreement would be more durable, more sustainable, and more legitimate: one with the Palestinian Authority or the State of Palestine? Strategically, it is in the best interest of Israel and the United States to support Palestine’s quest for statehood. Recognizing the State of Palestine is not recognition of Hamas or Fatah, but the right of the Palestinian people to join the international community. It would help undermine radicalism and extremism at home, because it says – loudly and clearly – that diplomacy works, not violence.

As a Muslim, I feel shame for what some individuals and groups are doing in the name of my religion. But I also feel very proud when I read about the tolerance and mercy of the second caliph, Umar ibn al-Khattab, who saw an old Jew begging and allocated for him a monthly salary; or Saladin, who sent his physician to treat his sick enemy Richard the Lionheart; or the illuminating history of Andalusia, where Islam, Christianity, and Judaism coexisted in peace and harmony. That is what the Wasatia initiative is all about. We aspire to leave a legacy of peace, forbearance, coexistence, reconciliation, compassion, empathy, and respect. This is the inheritance we would like to leave to our children. It may now seem like a dream, but deep in my heart I feel one day it will become a reality.

The voices of wisdom and moderation should grow louder. The moderate majority should not remain bystanders when mayhem looms. We need to overcome our obsession with failure and invest in the future. Reconciliation is the starting point and it should commence today for peace to prevail.

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A Plea for Moderate Islam

January 15, 2015

Mohammed Dajani Daoudi

To mark the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, Egyptian President Abdul Fattah el-Sisi delivered an impassioned speech at Al-Azhar University calling for reforming Islam and purging the religion of extremist ideas. This call should not be taken lightly, particularly in the aftermath of the tragic spate of terrorist attacks in Paris. However, it does provoke several difficult questions: How can we reform Islam? How can Islam, and for that matter all religions, be purged of radicals and extremists who preach and practice hate and intolerance in the name of God? Can the state impose religious reform without the support of official religious authorities? Can there be an honest and enlightened interpretation of the Quran without sparking a counterrevolution?

Religious texts, whether Muslim, Jewish, or Christian, share similar messages of peace, justice, mercy, forgiveness, reconciliation, and moderation. The Quran even cautions against religious zeal, warning in Surat al-Nisaa: "...do not commit excess in your religion." Similarly, Prophet Muhammad instructed his followers to "[a]dopt the path of moderation." In spite of this, many preachers talk about the ascendancy of their own faith over all other religions; they have no interest in interfaith dialogue or understanding.

Sisi's comments are welcome, but they are only the beginning. He was right to point out that the heart of the problem lies in "interpretations of the faith entrenched for hundreds of years." For quite some time, radical Muslims have been interpreting the verses of the Quran to serve their own political agendas, and only a few moderates have had the courage to stand up to them.

For instance, one interpretation of verses six and seven of Surat al-Fatiha is particularly controversial. "Guide us to the straight path," the verse reads, "The path of those upon whom You have bestowed favor, not of those who have evoked [Your] anger or of those who are astray." Radical Muslims teach this to mean that Muslims are blessed, Jews are cursed, and Christians have gone astray. However, an understanding that is more harmonious with other verses of the Quran is that the pious -- whether Muslim, Jewish, or Christian -- are blessed, the non-believers are cursed, and those who are lost are the hypocrites since Islam is meant to be a message to all of humanity.

Another example is verse nineteen from Surat aal-Imran, which states that "religion to God is Islam."

For radical Muslims, this verse means that God has distinguished Islam from Christianity and Judaism. However, the word "Islam" in this context, as is clear from other verses in the Quran, refers to those who submit to, believe in, and worship God, which would include Jews and Christians. The Quran asserts in Surat aal-Imran: "Say, 'We have believed in Allah and in what was revealed to us and what was revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Descendants, and in what was given to Moses and Jesus and to the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and we are Muslims [submitting] to Him.'"

Extremists have also embraced a controversial hadith, recorded in Sahih al-Muslim's collection and attributed to the Prophet, which predicted a battle on the Day of Judgment between Jews and Muslims in which Jews would be annihilated and trees and stones will call upon Muslims to kill the Jews hiding behind them. This hadith contradicts the teachings of Islam and the text of the Quran which says, in Surat aal-Imran, "He [God] has sent down upon you, [O Muhammad], the Book in truth, confirming what was before it. And He revealed the Torah and the Gospel." Elsewhere, in Surat al-Ankabut, it says: "And do not argue with the People of the Scripture except in a way that is best, except for those who commit injustice among them, and say, "We believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you. And our God and your God is one; and we are Muslims [in submission] to Him." There are many other parts of the Quran and hadith that similarly challenge such hostile readings, including the biographical accounts of the Prophet recorded in the hadith collection of Sahih al-Bukhari. He describes how the Prophet stood up in respect when a funeral procession passed by him. His companions commented, "But it is a funeral of a Jew," to which the Prophet responded: "Isn't he a human soul?"

Moderate Muslims cannot remain bystanders. We have to join forces in recognition that our religion has been hijacked by a small, vocal minority for political ends. We, the silent, moderate majority, must raise our voices no matter the risk and stand up for what we believe. Only our voices can stem the allure of radical Islam. We must draw on our creativity and innovation to promote moderation in religion and politics, and strive to create a world built on egalitarianism, democracy, moderation, and prosperity. This is the true straight path.

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Professor Mohammed Dajani, In Defense of Tolerance and Freedom

May 5, 2014

Mohammed Dajani Daoudi

Editor's Note:

Prof. Mohammed Dajani, a leading member of a very distinguished Palestinian family, is Director of the American Studies Program and of the library at al-Quds University, in Jerusalem and Abu Dis. He is also the founder and director of Wasatiya, a movement to study and advocate an authentic, tolerant, and enlightened version of Islam.

Recently, in his private capacity, Prof. Dajani led a delegation of Palestinian students on an educational visit to the Auschwitz concentration camp, in order to advance honest historical understanding, conflict resolution, and reconciliation. But as a result, he and his students are now subject to a vicious campaign of slander, threats, and harassment by Palestinian extremists, and even by the university employees union.

So today, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas's recent public condemnation of the Holocaust will be more credible if he comes quickly to Prof. Dajani's defense. And I believe it is imperative for the U.S. government and all people of goodwill to speak out urgently and forcefully on behalf of this courageously moderate Palestinian teacher and his students.

Below is the text of a letter from Prof. Dajani to the al-Quds University employees union about this shocking case.

David Pollock

To the members of the al-Quds University employees union,

As you know, you have made the unfair and harmful decision to dismiss me from your union. You have also sent students and employees to harass me at my office at the university library with the aim of putting both my physical wellbeing and my reputation in harm's way.

You are aware of the incitement against me both at the university and online, and you even asked the students who participated in the educational visit to Poland and who are members of your union to write reports against me, which could put my personal security and livelihood at risk. You are also aware of the defamation campaign against me. You have insulted me, and I hold you fully responsible for anything that happens to me.

You know that these actions are illegal and their actors are subject to legal accountability. This is especially true seeing as how:

1 - You know that I am not a member of your union and I did not register in it. I have nothing to do with your union and I have never participated in any of the al-Quds University's activities or elections. Therefore, you are aware that the decision to dismiss me from a union I am not a member of is only aimed at slander, provocation, and personal and professional harm in an obvious violation of legal provisions.

2 - You know that the student visit to Poland, which I supervised, forms an essential part of my job as a teacher. It was also a purely educational activity as was confirmed in all of the press interviews in which I participated.

3- You know that this trip was taken in a private capacity, completely independent of al-Quds University and had no link with the university or your union, as the university clarified in a statement issued in its name. Therefore, you have no grounds for your decisions and no reasoning that warrants further discussion.

4 - You know that the decision you made is a blatant interference in my work as a teacher, which aims to transfer learning and knowledge to students, and to reinforce both. You have no right to interfere in this work and force your opinions upon my teaching method because it is not your prerogative.

5 - You know that I did not violate any of al-Quds University's policies or directives in a way that might have given rise to such a decision, knowing that I am a director of libraries at this university. Therefore, there was no goal from taking this legal measure against me except to cause harm.

6 - You know that I have fulfilled my teaching and educational duty, a duty which was the reason behind your decision, during a period of leave from the university. Therefore, you had no basis for this harmful decision against me.

7 - You know that there are members of your union who study at Israeli universities and teach in Israeli institutions. Yet you have taken no such measures against them. It should be noted that you have no prerogative to take such measures or make such decisions nor are there any provisions within your by-laws allowing you to do so.

8 - You know that I met with the president of your union and asked him to stop the campaign of incitement against me. I expressed my desire to meet with him and with your union to explain all the facts from my point of view. He promised to arrange such a meeting, but later surprised me the union's decision, which is proof of malice.

9 - You know that the university's mission is to expand the intellectual capacities of its students by exposing them to all ideas and all philosophical, religious, and political opinions in order to give them the capacity to discern between right and wrong. You also know that in repressing the freedom of education, and the freedom of teachers to expand their students' opportunities to explore new worlds in search for the truth, you are violating the key principles of the freedom of education stipulated by international legislations.

10 - You also know that the union's mission is to unite rather than divide the union and the student body, those for and against the freedom of education, those for and against normalization, and those for or against the use of peaceful methods. The union's mission is not to impose its opinion through intimidation, but rather through discussion.

Based on the above, I would like to inform you that I am in the process of filing a legal and penal complaint against you and against your union, as well as against each member of the union's council who made the decision against me and sought its circulation. The claim is also against all those who sought to attack me at the library and those who are proven to have participated in the making of any decision or the taking of any action aiming at harming my person or my reputation, or aiming at causing defamation or incitement against me as well as putting my life at risk. I file these complaints against the mentioned persons as members of the union and as individuals. I consider this letter to serve as a warning.

Professor Mohammed Suleiman Dajani

Are Negotiations a New Opportunity Being Lost by the Palestinians?

January 30, 2014

Mohammed Dajani Daoudi

Recently, there has been talk of the Palestinian “no”s, which have replaced the Arab League’s three “no”s of the Khartoum summit in 1967—no negotiations, no reconciliation, no recognition. Although some writers have voiced their support for the current stance of the Palestinian Authority vis-à-vis the unsettled issues between Israelis and Palestinians, others believe that they will meet the same fate as the stipulations of the Khartoum Summit, rendering the negotiations a lost opportunity for the Palestinian people.

The first “no” concerns the Israeli condition related to the recognition of Israel as a “Jewish state.” On this, it is unclear why the Palestinian position is so rigid. Israel’s condition has no relation to memory, conscience, or the Palestinian, Arab, and Islamic ‘narrative’ of the history of the Palestinian issue and the Arab-Israeli struggle, nor is it related to the refugees’ right to return and reparations, or to Palestinian green line “citizenship.” Palestinians have already recognized the Jewish nature of the state of Israel as represented by its name. After such recognition, what concern is it of the Palestinians whether Israel wishes to be Jewish or secular or democratic or Christian? If Israel went before the United Nations tomorrow and presented a request to change its name from the “State of Israel” to the “Jewish State of Israel,” as some Muslim countries such as Libya and Iran have done to add “Islamic” to their name, would the Palestinian Authority object before the UN? And would the world take us seriously if we did?

The Israeli voices behind this condition seek to provoke the Palestinians into displaying more rigidity in order to blame them for the failure of negotiations, as occurred when the UN resolution was issued calling for the partition of Palestine in 1947. The Israeli demand related to it being a “Jewish” state is a mirage. If we look at it closely, it will disappear.

The second “no” is related to East Jerusalem, meaning old Jerusalem inside the city walls where sanctified religious places converge. The question is: why isn’t this religiously and historically significant place given a special international status so that everyone is responsible for its care and oversight? Outside the walls, practically speaking, Jerusalem has grown into a city that is not highly religious. It has been built by adding successive Arab and Israeli municipalities to the city. This Jerusalem is divided into Israeli Jerusalem and Arab Jerusalem, separated by psychological and

political barriers without any actual wall or barricade. Saying the city is united does not reflect the reality on the ground. The aim of Israel's obstinacy is to push Palestinians to take up rigid positions in order to make negotiations collapse and Kerry's mission fail, and to put an end to the peace process.

The third "no" relates to the Israeli presence in the Jordan Valley on the border of the Palestinian state. Palestinians have accepted that a third power under the United Nations – be it NATO or American-led, national or international – should be stationed in this area. Yet, though this notion is agreed upon or accepted in principle, if a peace agreement is signed, then Israel will technically be treated just like any other foreign country, but with greater abilities and expertise to protect Palestinian towns and areas against terrorism and daily bombs in markets and mosques, as is the case in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Baghdad, and Afghanistan. On this point, what matters to Palestinians is that Israeli forces alone not be concentrated at the doors of the Palestinian state, deciding what to prohibit and what to allow, as if we are in a great prison. The stationing of a single third power on the borders in these areas won't protect the Palestinian state from the terrorism of hostile powers that will bring to Palestine the woes that a number of the region's peoples currently suffer. Therefore, it is necessary to coordinate with Jordan in order to make Palestinian-Jordanian-Israeli security arrangements, in addition to setting up technologically advanced equipment to monitor the borders. Direct Palestinian-Jordanian-Israeli military presence, along with setting up technologically advanced equipment to monitor the borders and building an advanced security wall, is the ideal solution to guard the 250km long valley. No one power alone will be able to close the border or ensure security and adequate protection to prevent terrorist organizations from crossing over into the urban areas inside.

The fourth "no" is related to the Israeli condition that the Palestinian state be demilitarized. Though this demand currently seems to detract from Palestinian sovereignty, in the future, it might become clear that this is in fact in the Palestinians' best interest. If the state is demilitarized, funds can be allocated to state building, fueling the economy, and improving social conditions rather than going to military spending. When the allied powers decided at the end of World War II that Japan and Germany must be demilitarized, the Japanese and German people used their budgets to rebuild their countries and became two of the world's industrial superpowers. Conversely, one of the reasons behind the Shah of Iran's fall was his use of oil revenues to purchase advanced weapons instead of using the funds to improve the conditions of the Iranian people.

There are other "no"s that can also be negotiated. The Palestinian negotiating position should accord with the lower limits of the terms on which the peace process was based. But they must do so without seeming obstinate or rigid simply for the sake of appearing not to show any "flexibility" or "excess."

Adopting this logic, it is possible for Kerry's mission to succeed, reaching a peace that secures a future for our children. There is clearly a great difference in the balance of power between the two parties, and the Israelis always repeat among themselves: "Why would we want peace and give up land? We won the war and if we'd lost the war, we would have lost everything." They also suffer from

the Holocaust complex that has made them believe in the refrain: "What happened won't happen again."

Thus, Kerry has built his strategy on the idea that an agreement must first be reached with the Israelis, and then negotiations can occur with the Palestinians to find points of agreement between the two, putting pressure on both parties to be flexible on their positions. In doing this, he has used European, Jewish, and American pressure on the Israelis and Arab pressure on the Palestinians. It will be fortunate for both parties if Kerry is able to obtain satisfactory results in the negotiations, having postponed his 11th tour. He is currently waiting for Israel to finish its own negotiations and then those with Washington, in order to bring the Palestinians to the table and negotiate with them on the results of the American-Israeli negotiations.

The Israeli extreme right seeks to make the negotiations fail, placing the responsibility on the Palestinian leadership in order to stop American and European aid. If Kerry fails and leaves, he won't have any excuse or need to return to the region again, leaving the Palestinians vulnerable to aggression, settlements, and occupation. This is the strategy of the Israeli extremists who oppose peace.

At the same time, I must reject the claim that all Israelis are opposed to peace and all Palestinians want peace. There is a camp containing Palestinians and Israelis who seek peace up against a camp that contains Palestinians and Israelis who are opposed to peace and seek to abort the peace efforts.

When Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser accepted the Rogers Plan proposed by the U.S. Secretary of State in 1968, the Palestinians refused it outright based on the slogans of hardliners. He left and didn't come back. And when Egyptian president Anwar Sadat invited us to come with him to Camp David in 1978 for negotiations, we stood with the extremists and called him a traitor. He went without us, and we regret that to this day.

Why don't we learn from the lessons of the past and listen to those in the middle, for the sake of our children's future?

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Teaching the Holocaust in Palestine

November 26, 2013

Mohammed Dajani Daoudi

Of all countries, Holocaust education in Palestine is most challenging due to the persistent Palestinian-Israeli conflict. While to others, Holocaust education is not exclusively a Jewish issue, to Arabs, and in particular to Palestinians, Holocaust education is a purely Jewish concern. Obstacles to Holocaust education in Palestine exist on four levels: educational, political, religious, and psychological.

On the educational level, traditionally speaking, the Holocaust was never mentioned in Arab or Palestinian textbooks, nor was it taught in Palestinian schools or universities. It is simply totally ignored, even as a part of history lessons. Thus, Palestinians are mostly ignorant of this catastrophic event.

On the political level, the Palestinians are the only nation in modern times still under military occupation. Like some others, they are being denied their right to self-determination and the establishment of a Palestinian democratic secular independent state. Thus, the tendency of most Palestinians is to perceive the Holocaust as the source of their 1948 *Nakba* [Catastrophe], and many become irritated when it is celebrated by Israelis as their Day of Independence. The conflict pushes many to perceive it as Zionist propaganda to generate sympathy for the Jewish cause.

In Palestine, radical religious teaching of Islam advocates a clash between Islam on the one side, and Judaism and Christianity on the other. Quranic verses are being interpreted and explained to support that argument. For instance, verse 143 of al-Baqarah Surah states: {"And thus we have created you a centrist (temperate/midleground) nation."} The verse, instead of being explained as promoting justice, tolerance, and temperance, is interpreted to say: "Muslims are in the middle between Jews who killed prophets and Christians who made their prophet God." Another example is how the last verses of al-Fatihah Surah are being taught: "Guide us to the right path, the path of those whom you have blessed (Muslims instead of believers), not those who incurred your wrath (Jews instead of non-believers), or those who are gone astray (Christians instead of hypocrites)."

One of the widespread Hadith that is attributed – or to be correct, misattributed – to the Prophet states: "The Day of Judgment will not arrive until the Muslims fight the Jews and the Muslims will kill them. Even if a Jew hides behind a rock or a tree, the rock or the tree will say: 'O Muslim, O

worshipper of God! There is a Jew behind me. Come and kill him', except the salt bush [*Gharqad*], for it is one of the Jews' trees." Religious textbooks add, "in this Prophetic Saying [*Hadith*] he [Muhammad] tells us of one of the forms of the battle between Muslims and Jews..." This text contradicts the verses in the Quran, which revere the sanctity of life as expressed in such verses as: {"Nor take life - which God has made sacred - except for just cause."} [al-Isra Surah, verse 33]. The Quran also affirms: {"We have sent you as a mercy to mankind."} [al-Anbia Surah, verse 107] and this mercy includes all human beings, including Jews, Christians, and non-believers. No doubt, such a Hadith contradicts the following verses: {"Had your Lord pleased, He would have made you one nation."} [Table Surah; 48]; {"Had it been God's will, He could have made them all of one religion."} [Shurat Surah, verse 8]; {"There shall be no compulsion in religion."} [Baqarat Surah, verse 256]; {"Say: This is the truth from your Lord. Let him who will, believe in it, and him who will, deny it."} [Cave Surah; 29]; {"Your Lord will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection regarding the things about which they differed."} (16:124); {"So God shall judge between you on the Day of Resurrection"} (Qur'an 4:141). It also contradicts the narrative related by al-Bukhari: "A funeral procession passed by the Prophet, and he stood up in respect. A companion said to him: "The funeral is of a Jew." The Prophet responded: "Was it not a human soul?"

The Quran reveres both the Torah and the Bible, describing them as holy books. It also refers to Jews and Christians as "People of the Book"; or "Those who were delivered the Book." There are 60 verses that directly address Jews in the Quran such as: {"Children of Israel, remember the blessing I have bestowed on you, and that I have exalted you above the nations."} [al-Baqarah Surah; verse 47]; {"Children of Israel, remember that I have bestowed favors upon you, and exalted you above the nations."} [al-Baqarah Surah, verse 122].

On the psychological level, Palestinian society is deeply wounded, and the pain and suffering has not yet healed. While the Holocaust genocide was in the past, the Palestinian agony is in the present. Consequently, it is most difficult to ask the victims suffering from the occupation of their homeland and the continued expropriation of their lands to be educated about the suffering of the perpetrator.

Strategy for Holocaust Education

Palestinians raise the question: Why should we learn about the Holocaust? My response is that the values of Holocaust education lie in the following:

- (1) It is a sign of respect for the truth. When truth is denied or ignored, it destroys those values one cherishes.
- (2) It is the right thing to do. Being criticized for doing it does not mean not to do it.
- (3) Holocaust denial and distortion is historically wrong and morally unacceptable.
- (4) The need to learn the tragic lessons of the past is necessary to avoid their recurrence in the

future.

(5) The Quran as well as the Prophet encourage seeking knowledge and learning: {"...and say, "My Lord, increase me in knowledge."} (Taha Surah, verse 20). The Prophet is quoted to say: "Seek knowledge from cradle to grave." This impels us to decide: "I do not know but I want to know."

(6) As the wise have argued, without knowing about evil, we cannot understand the meaning of good.

(7) Showing empathy and compassion for the suffering of others, even if no friendship or love bonds you, would make this world a better place to live in.

The educational approach is most important when teaching sensitive topics. Thus, I would encourage active learning through the adoption of the following steps for teaching such a controversial topic: (1) teaching creativity and critical thinking; (2) teaching *wasatia* and moderation; (3) teaching the Holocaust along with other genocides in modern history such as Rwanda, explaining linkages and connections. Documentary films as an instructional medium would be most useful. Finding a textbook in Arabic to use proved most difficult, therefore I co-authored a book with my colleagues Zeina Barakat and Martin Rau entitled *Holocaust - Human Suffering: Is there a way out of violence?* (2012).

In conclusion, when we showed a documentary on the Holocaust at Al-Quds University, one of the students raised her hand and asked, "Why should we learn about the Holocaust when Israelis have made the usage of the term Nakba illegal and banned mentioning anything about it in their textbooks?" My answer was concise and precise: "Never mind what others do, you do the right thing."

Dr. Mohammed Dajani Daoudi is the founder of Wasatia in Palestine and a professor of political science at Al-Quds University.

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Discussion: Is Egypt on the Path to Democracy?

July 10, 2013

Editor

In this moment of political uncertainty in Egypt, and amid rising polarization among Egyptian society, Fikra Forum would like to take this opportunity to open a discussion about the meaning of these significant events for both Egypt and the region, the role that the spectrum of political forces will or should play in the future of Egyptian governance, and finally, how the U.S. should respond.

Starting off this discussion, Palestinian Professor Mohammed Dajani, founder of the Wasatia movement and professor at Al Quds University, states that the Egyptian army's intervention is a positive development for the future of Egyptian democracy, as well as for delegitimizing the Muslim Brotherhood's unworthy hold on political Islam in the region as a whole -- and even for Islam itself, as a religion rather than a political party. We ask that you consider Professor Dajani's point of view, and share your opinion or reaction with the Fikra Forum community. To participate in this discussion, please write to us in English or Arabic at editor [at] fikraforum [dot] org.

Mohammed Dajani:

“Vox populi, a Latin phrase that literally means 'voice of the people,' is generally used by political scientists to define the democratic system. So, if democracy is 'the voice of the people,' then Egypt is the only democracy on earth. While Athenian democracy glorified by the West was in reality the voice of the elite, Egyptian democracy proved to be the real voice of the people in which the people who have been denied their rights and freedoms made their voice heard without shooting one bullet and without having to elect phony representatives. We are witnessing today the historic birth of an original new democratic model. Here, the Egyptian army, rather than slaying its people and destroying the country in order to protect the interests of those in power as has happened in Syria, stood up to protect the right of the people to overthrow a theocratic autocracy. One day, Egyptians will undoubtedly look back and say, “I am proud to be an Egyptian!”

As for those who claim that this is the beginning of the end of political Islam, they will again be proven wrong. The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) never spoke for Islam and it was Muslims who overthrew them. They used Islam to dazzle the masses and used democracy to climb to power, but once in power, they burnt the democratic ladder to block out all other political entities from the system. The moderate swing voters who brought the MB to power used their feet to throw them out. Islam as a religion will emerge untainted by the MB's shady political motives.”

Some questions to consider:

- *Can military intervention lead to true democracy?*
- *When, if ever, is it appropriate for democrats to urge military intervention?*
- *What are the appropriate limits – both political and economic – on the Egyptian military and how can those limits be achieved?*
- *What lessons will non-violent Islamists take from the MB's experience? How do democrats best entice such political groups to participate in electoral politics?*

Wasatia Movement of Moderate Islam: An Exclusive Interview with Professor Mohammed Dajani

August 30, 2012

Mohammed Dajani Daoudi

On Friday, August 24th, Fikra Forum editors conducted an interview with Professor Mohammed Dajani Daoudi, founder of the Wasatia movement and professor at Al Quds University. Al Wasatia is the first Islamic Palestinian movement that calls for a negotiated peace with Israel that would help to bring peaceful solutions to the acute religious, economic, social, and political crises plaguing Palestinian society. It advocates the establishment of an independent, tolerant, democratic, secular, non-militarized state that fosters economic prosperity and social justice and would adopt liberal values of equity, tolerance, pluralism, freedom of expression, rule of law, and respect for civil and human rights. Al Wasatia believes that all of these are values advocated in Islamic holy texts and traditions.

What was your inspiration for starting Al Wasatia?

It was in late 2006 during the month of Ramadan. My house used to overlook the Dahiet al-Barid / Ram Checkpoint. I was standing on the balcony of my office and saw hundreds of Palestinians from the West Bank trying to pass the checkpoint to go to Jerusalem to pray in al-Haram al-Sharif and al-Aqsa Mosque. The Israeli soldiers at the checkpoint pushed them back and threw tear gas grenades at them, but to no avail. The wind sent the tear gas in my direction more than hundred meters away. I expected shooting and heavy media coverage, but suddenly, I noticed that things cooled down. When I inquired, I found out that a compromise was reached between the leading officer and the people. The Israeli army provided buses, which took the Palestinians to Jerusalem to pray, while holding their identity cards, and gave them back upon their return.

This episode made me think: Such people are religious, but moderately so. Had they been extremists, they would have refused to negotiate, using violence to get media attention. However, they opted to negotiate and use dialogue to reach a win-win peaceful compromise.

Then the question came to my mind: Who represents the religious moderates in Palestine? There are more than ten religious Islamist parties in Palestine, but they all advocate a radical Islam. As a result, Wasatia was established on January 1, 2007 and the first annual Wasatia conference was held on March 21, 2007, marking the beginning of spring.

How does Wasatia interpret Islam and the Quran to combat extremism and promote peace?

Islam is being taught by radicals as if it is on a collision course with other religions. These radicals teach Islam as a faith to be the supreme religion, that Islam as a faith is God's religion, that God sent Islam to replace Christianity and Judaism because both went astray, and that Prophet Mohammed supersedes all other prophets. All of this contradicts the Quranic text. The Quran is considered by Muslims to be the infallible flawless word of God. The Quran says {"And the Word of your Lord has been fulfilled in truth and in justice. None can change His Words."}[6:115]. Thus, since {"None can change His Words"}, the knot lies in how the Quran is interpreted. Is the text being interpreted to promote values of hatred, enmity, and conflict with the other, or to promote goodness, peace, equality, compassion, pluralism, respect, empathy, understanding, and cooperation with the other?

One example is interpreting the word wasatan in the verse {"We have created you ummattan wasatan"}. The term wasat in the verse is interpreted by Wasatia to indicate justice, balance, moderation, middle ground, centrism, and temperance. Therefore, the Islamic nation is a just and moderate nation. Muslim radicals interpret it that Muslims are in between "Jews who brought upon themselves God's anger" and "Christians who have gone astray," or that Muslims are between "Jews who killed prophets" and "Christians who made their prophet a God," or finally, that Muslims are between "Jews who brought upon themselves God's anger" and "Christians who have gone astray." Such interpretations contradict many verses in the Quran such as when it says, {"Believers, Jews, Christians, and Sabaeans, - whoever believes in God and the Judgment Day and does what is right - shall be rewarded by their Lord, they have nothing to fear, or to regret."} [Baqara Sura; verse 62].

Who are the people behind Wasatia? How would you describe an average Wasatia member?

In Palestine, there is varied secular elite, a combination of those who studied in Western Europe and the United States, as well as those who studied in Arab universities such as Jordan, Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, and those who studied in the Soviet Union and the Eastern Block. Secularism bonds them together and unifies them against religious fundamentalists. However, while secular and liberal ideas join them together, these ideas separate them from the masses that are deeply attached and committed to Islam. While the Palestinian secular elite read Rousseau, Voltaire, Kant, Locke, Nietzsche, Marx, Lenin, Guevara, etc., the Palestinian masses read the Holy Quran, the sira [life] of the Prophet, and the teachings of the Islamic caliphs and thinkers.

In Palestine, hard-liners are well entrenched in the leadership of the Islamist movements, fortifying their status by the Israeli and Palestinian Authority (PA) repression against them. Imprisonment, torture, and humiliation impact ideology so that the more Islamist activists have been exposed to repression, the better chance they have to rise to power, and the more hawkish they become when in power.

Wasatia appeals to a constituency of individuals who have a deep commitment to Islam and to its approach to conflict resolution through moderate and peaceful means. On this foundation, Wasatia aspires to build a more promising future. The goal will remain the establishment of a Palestinian

state with East Jerusalem as its religious capital. However, the road to be taken is peaceful negotiations, not violent confrontation.

A Wasati is a person who believes that Muslims, Christians, and Jews worship the same God and share the same values; who believes in democracy, pluralism, tolerance, a non-violent approach to conflict, religious freedom, and the equitable treatment of women; who respects the right of individuals to disagree, or to worship the way they choose; who is willing to co-exist peacefully with peoples of other faiths, to seek dialogue with them, and to emphasize the common ground rather than the differences between religions.

Shimon the Righteous taught: On three things does the world stand – on Torah, on divine service, and on acts of kindness [charity]. Wasatia teaches: On three things does the world stand – on the Holy Books, on divine service, and on acts of voluntarism and kindness [charity].

Would you describe the Wasatia movement as “mainstream”? How do you go about normalizing the values of moderation, plurality, and acceptance among mainstream society?

I would describe the Wasatia vision and message as “mainstream,” but the Wasatia movement itself still has a long way to go. We hope that the spread of Wasatia culture within Palestinian society will improve the quality of life within and will promote a better image of the Palestinian people abroad, helping to convince the world that we deserve to take our place among the nations. Politically, we strive to create an umbrella under which all moderate Palestinians can be united. If we succeed in joining together the different Palestinian factions under the banner of moderation, we will be in a much better position to pursue a fruitful dialogue for negotiations with the Israelis, a path that is far more likely to achieve peace.

We go about normalizing the values of moderation, plurality, and acceptance among mainstream society through the media, publishing books in Arabic or English, and organizing training workshops to advance comprehension of justice, balance, volunteerism, and religious moderation as core values in Palestinian society. This will deepen knowledge of key factors and principles in Palestinian society that will create a context for religious pluralism, expanding the understanding of different religious traditions in Palestine, and fostering appreciation for the strengths and complexities of a religiously pluralistic society. We also seek to identify and guide knowledge of the principles, values, and practices of interfaith dialogue and to develop participants’ capacity for leadership in their society. The focus of such programs is to encourage and empower youth to create action plans related to religious and political pluralism, and to implement these plans in their own religious communities.

Do you ever think of expanding the Wasatia movement to other countries in the region? How might other countries benefit from the values of your movement?

Eventually, the Wasatia vision and concept will expand to other countries in the region. We hope to organize an annual conference that would bring together Wasatia movements and groups from other

countries to spread the culture of moderation and cooperation within the region.

What needs to take place in the region in order for the Wasatia culture to flourish?

Achieving a peaceful, comprehensive, and lasting solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict would definitely pave the way for a Wasatia moderate culture to flourish. By holding Islamic values of centrism, moderation, justice, balance, and tolerance, Wasatia adopts dialogue and negotiations as the best way to resolve conflicts or differences. Therefore, reaching a win-win situation, out of the ashes of agony, pain, and suffering, a mutually-accepted compromise may emerge.

Do you think Wasatia will ever form a political party?

Wasatia will eventually give birth to a political party that would stand on the foundational pillars of peace, state-building, governance reform, education, women's empowerment, religious and political moderation, and civil society development.

Dr. Mohammed Dajani Daoudi is the founder of the Wasatia movement and the director of the American Studies program at Al Quds University.

Morsi: Looking Beyond the Islamist Identity

June 28, 2012

Mohammed Dajani Daoudi

For the next decade, think tanks in the United States and Europe will be analyzing why an Islamist won the Egyptian presidential elections. To save them the trouble, I will give them the simple answer: the Egyptian voters did not vote for Mohammed Morsi as an individual or for his election platform. They did not watch his interviews to see where he stands on Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty, women, Christians, etc. Those were the concerns of the West, but they were not the concerns of the Egyptian voters. The Egyptian voters did not vote for the Muslim Brotherhood nor did they care what it stood for. The Muslim Brotherhood was and still is, like Hamas in Gaza, a small minority which has no mass appeal. Then how one can explain why they won? Quite simply, the Egyptian voter voted for Islam. The West is being perceived as waging a war against Islam, and so the response is to empower those who are carrying the banner of Islam.

The voting behavior of the Arab voter is emotional rather than rational. Campbell et al. in their book, *The American Voter* (1960), argued that ignorance and unreliability dominated the American (swing) voters. Likewise, this theory was true for the Palestinian elections of 2006 and the Egyptian elections of 2012, and accurately reflects the reality on the ground with regards to both elections. The Egyptian voter, like the Palestinian voter before him, is neither highly educated, nor is he a sophisticated rational voter. The West gave both voters more credit than they deserved. For instance, Western analysts explained the victory of Hamas as a rejection vote against the corruption of Fatah while in reality, that was far from the minds of the Palestinian voters. The Palestinian voters voted for Hamas because in their mind, they perceived themselves as voting for Islam and for those who were perceived as carrying the banners of Islam.

The new ruling elite of Egypt are far from being elite. They belong to the lower classes, which are poor, uneducated, and have no prior experience in government and diplomatic affairs. Power will intoxicate them and money will corrupt them as it did to their colleagues in Gaza. But the important thing is not to put pressure on them to abide by a Western scale. Sporadic incidents may take place against Christians or women, but those incidents should be disassociated with official policy. Radicals will attempt to pull the new government to a confrontation with the West and Israel to draw it away from the middle. Here, it is advisable to keep moderate Islam as the reference point and to empower it in the face of radical Islamists.

The best advice for the West is not to treat Mohammed Morsi as an Islamist, but as the elected democratic president of Egypt. Thinking of him as an Islamist, and getting obsessed with his party as a ruler of Egypt would only lead the West down the slope of a deteriorating relationship. If the West insists on thinking of Morsi as an Islamist, and treats him as such, then it will be a self-fulfilled prophesy come true and he will behave like one. However, if they perceive him as democrat leading his country out of its misery to a new future then they may give him a chance to rule as a democrat.

Dr. Mohammed Dajani is the head of the American Studies Program at al-Quds University in Jerusalem and founder of the Wasatia movement of moderate Islam.