

Can Admitting a Wrong Make It Right?

To address the future of the Middle East, Obama must look to the past.

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Newsweek Web Exclusive

Jun 1, 2009 | Updated: 3:02 p.m. ET Jun 1, 2009

When the president of the United States of America stands before a huge crowd at Cairo University and makes his long-anticipated speech to the Muslim world Thursday, will he say that he's sorry? Will he, for instance, offer to make amends for the blind support some of his predecessors have shown for Israel's occupation of Arab lands? Will he ask forgiveness for the CIA coup in Iran that overthrew a democratically elected government there in 1953? Will Barack Obama try to talk directly to the people and apologize for the many decades Washington has spent supporting Arab dictators, including the one who rules in Egypt, the country where he is speaking?

Probably Obama will say none of these things, and wise voices argue that he should not. "Discussions of who is going to apologize for what and how the apologies are going to be worded and what they're supposed to convey is a prescription for getting sidetracked, bogged down and producing more antagonism," former U.S. national-security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski [told me a few weeks ago](#).

There would have to be reciprocity, after all. Will we hear the Iranians apologize for their long history supporting suicide bombings, and the holding of American hostages in Tehran and Beirut in the 1980s? Or their training and equipping of militias that killed many American troops in Iraq? Would the Palestinians regret the repeated slaughter of innocent Israelis in blatant terrorist attacks?

You see the problem. Yet there is a body of evidence to suggest that the most vital element in Middle East peacemaking may lie in questions of language and symbols—what social anthropologist Scott Atran calls a "moral logic" based on "sacred values." And sometimes what that boils down to, essentially, is saying you're sorry. As Atran sees it, this is not really a theological question. It's more fundamental than fundamentalism. The need for dignity and respect—a craving for recognition and vindication—is at the heart of the region's most intractable conflicts.

Such issues defy conventional notions of cost and benefit, says Atran, who holds distinguished posts at the University of Michigan, John Jay College in New York and the National Center for Scientific Research in France. Working with fellow scholar Jeremy Ginges, Atran has interviewed Israelis and Arabs, leaders and followers, throughout the region. And he has found that among the hardliners who now tend to dominate the debate and dictate stalemate on all sides, the offer of money or other material benefits not only is rejected, it increases their anger and their recalcitrance. "Billions of dollars have been sacrificed to demonstrate the advantages of peace and coexistence," Atran and Ginges wrote earlier this year at the height of fighting in Gaza. "Yet still both sides opt for war."

Even when ballots replace bullets, these factors that Atran calls "intangible" remain important. An obvious reason that extremists have done so well in the region's elections in recent years, whether among the Arabs, Iranians or Israelis, is that they have addressed emotional and moral questions head on. Hamas's essential message when it won the Palestinian elections in 2006 was one of resistance and dignity in the face of occupation and corruption. If a Hizbullah-led coalition wins at the polls in Lebanon this weekend, as many predict, its Kalashnikov-emblazoned banner of pride and defiance will have been key. And if President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad gets a second term out of voters later this month, his refusal to bow to international demands that Iran give up nuclear enrichment, along with his own demands that the United States apologize for its past actions toward Iran, will have helped to put him over the top.

Israel has long required recognition of its "right to exist" as a precondition for direct peace talks with any group, and one reason that Hamas remains isolated is its refusal to concede that point. But the party of far-right foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman has pushed to go further, demanding

that Arab citizens of Israel sign a declaration of loyalty to the Jewish state. That bill was rejected by the cabinet under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. But another mandating a one-year prison term for anyone who says in writing that Israel is other than "Jewish and democratic" was approved. An even longer sentence of three years would be handed down to Arabs who mourn what they call the Nakba, the catastrophe of their defeat in 1948 when Israel declared its independence.

The Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* and others have called this a "racist campaign" against the Arabs who make up some 20 percent of Israel's population. But it reflects a long tradition on the Israeli right that presumes those sacred values that Atran talks about can belong to only one side, which is the Israeli side. In his 1993 book, *A Place Among the Nations: Israel and the World*, Netanyahu deplored "the tendency to ascribe to the Arabs the same sentiments that we felt in Israel, with a total disregard for the differences in culture, history and political values." In his opinion, the Arabs did not "loathe war" as much as the Israelis did, and no "peace" would ever really end the conflict. "What needs fixing is the underlying problem of Arab hostility," Netanyahu wrote. Today, Netanyahu advocates economic measures to calm the Palestinian hatred. Atran's research suggests that such plans only add insult to catastrophe.

In fact, all sides need to quit looking at their moral standing as a zero-sum game in which any concession to others is an admission of moral failing on their own. And this is the kind of lesson Obama likes to teach. So, in his speech Thursday he may lay out a detailed strategy for peace, but the core message is likely to be more subtle than a discussion of which settlements should be stopped and what acreage traded in the West Bank, or how many centrifuges should be allowed to spin nuclear gas into enriched uranium in Iran. In his memorable speech on race relations in the United States during the campaign last year, Obama told African-Americans that "moving beyond our old racial wounds" meant "embracing the burdens of our past without becoming victims of our past." His core message to all sides: "Your dreams do not have to come at the expense of my dreams."

That is likely to be the tone of Obama's address to the Islamic world (and Israel) as well. It's often said that two wrongs do not make a right. But in the Middle East today, admitting the wrongs on all sides may be the only way left to start to making things right.

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