

Diplomatic Efforts in the Middle East: Can Psychologists and Conflict Resolution Specialists Contribute to the Negotiation Process?¹

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There are a variety of ways that a clinical psychologist can write about a particular issue or subject matter. Perhaps the more traditional route involves some form of objectified research and analysis. As much as I might like to utilize such an approach, the actual implementation of this kind of format seems to elude me. So, I have given way to the more precarious mode of communication that is both personal and experiential.

Perhaps it should be noted from the outset that the core theme here is particularly devoted to the “conflictive flashpoints” in the Middle East, and the outside powers which have inextricably been drawn to the region as of late. Like so many Americans and citizens of many other countries in the world, the unfolding events in the aftermath of September 11, 2001 have captured my attention enormously, both from a professional and personal standpoint.

The U.S. deployment of troops to Afghanistan initially, and subsequently to Iraq, has profoundly engaged my thoughts and sentiments like few other prolonged situations have ever done. The impact has been particularly dramatic since I am also a clinical psychologist in the Army Reserve. But, as much as my adrenal glands were ignited in anticipation of being activated “down range,” it turned out my number remained dormant, leastwise throughout the first year of the war.

What has persistently gnawed on my senses throughout the whole ordeal has been the question of whether the research and clinical sides of psychological practice, as well as those trained in conflict resolution, can have any substantial contribution to make to the current situation that exists in the Middle East today. Despite the possibility psychological analysis and clinical “know how” will be relegated to “arm chair theorizing,” I find myself considering the notion again that psychology may have much to offer to the current conflict in Iraq, Israel, and the Middle East as a whole, particularly when various “avenues of approach” are made available.

On a much smaller scale, I am reminded of a psychiatric hospital I have been affiliated with. There have been several departmental turf battles, interpersonal conflicts, longstanding resentments, managerial disregard for adequate staffing, and what can be considered a widespread state of staff apathy and burnout. These problems have been noted for years, despite the presence of psychologists with considerable skills in conflict resolution, effective team building, and management-employee problem solving strategies.

¹ An early version of this paper was presented at the International Conference of Political Psychology in Lund Sweden, July 15 – 18, 2004.

One key obstacle preventing behavioral health professionals from having a positive impact is that they have rarely been given a “green light” from management to address these issues. So, whether the setting is a psychiatric hospital, for instance, or in an international context, the knowledge and skills psychologists possess regarding human behavior are likely to have greater difficulties being realized when a viable role has not been designated for them.

My difficulty since 9/11 has been to find opportunities where psychologists and conflict resolution professionals can effectively exercise the “tools of their trade” in such a way that their expertise and proposed interventions actually impact the decisions of policy makers in the United States, other countries in the Middle East, and many other countries associated with the events in the Middle East.

During the initial stages of Operation Iraqi Freedom, I attended a local Rotary Club meeting where a retired three star General gave a presentation on military steps being employed in the Iraqi theatre of operations. He responded cordially to a question posed regarding how much thought military leaders had given to addressing the prospect of another generation of terrorists emerging in years to come. His response was to note the armed forces were still operating in a reactive mode. It was therefore his assessment the military by and large had not yet been able to seriously evaluate the psychological forces at work which might lead to another wave of fresh terrorists “down the road” (i.e. terrorists “in the wings,” so to speak).

As understandable as it is that the primary focus of the military has been directed toward a decisive defeat of terrorist objectives, the simultaneous focus on the “larger landscape” is one particularly well suited to psychologists. Many social scientists, psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, and those trained in conflict resolution, have much to contribute to a deeper understanding of current terrorist mentality, the necessary ingredients needed to perpetuate more terrorism in the years to come, and conversely approaches likely to diminish future terrorist recruits (Cassimatis, 2002; Moghaddam & Marsella, eds., 2004; Silke, 2003; “Social Affairs Data-Mining, 2002)

In December 2003, an opportunity for psychologists emerged with regard to events in the Middle East. The very first Middle East/North Africa Regional Conference in Psychology convened for close to a week in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE). This conference was largely attended by psychologists and other mental health providers from various countries in the Gulf region and the Middle East as a whole, as well as a few from assorted distant countries. I was one of a small handful of American participants at the conference. Even though Israelis would not normally be allowed into an Arab county like the UAE, arrangements were made for several psychologists/academicians from Israel to bypass the normal entry point through Customs and be present for the conference.

A stated purpose of the conference was to address what impact Psychology could have on the various conflicts in the region. However, given the scientific nature of the

conference, the focus was predominantly directed to research-based presentations. Some exceptions did occur, such as a presentation by a Palestinian therapist describing her work with Palestinian women traumatized by the death of their spouses in Israel. However, very little attention was given to the current problem of American soldiers engaged in armed conflict within two Arab countries, and how psychologists might help to ameliorate the extent of the conflict and the rising death toll for indigenous Afghans, Iraqis, American soldiers, other Coalition forces, and contract workers alike.

I also received approval to conduct an impromptu Networking session to facilitate ongoing connections following the conclusion of the conference. This at least allowed a forum for me to inform the group of nine participants my interest in the roles psychologists might have regarding peacemaking in the region. My proposed area of interest did not spawn the kind of dialogue I had hoped for. Many factors very likely accounted for this lack of enthusiastic feedback – two reasons possibly being my “outsider” status and their view of the intractable nature of these regional conflicts.

My exposure to a more Arab approach to the field of psychology through my involvement at this conference did prove to be useful, even regarding the question I was attempting to find an answer to. For one thing, a dominant theme of the conference impressed itself on me – this being a profound distrust Arab practitioners appeared to have toward a westernized form of psychology being imposed on them. As has increasingly come to the fore with many cultural and ethnic groups, a number of participants were noting that the Arab world deeply steeped in Islamic values had need of developing their own culture-specific psychology.

This suggested to me that any viable peacemaking and conflict resolution strategies would likely be enhanced by incorporating an Arab/Islamic world view. Otherwise, any conflict resolution approaches employed by psychologists would easily be considered irrelevant, or at least flawed, in fostering reduced tensions in the region.

All the American-bred optimism in the universality of their democratic principles and psychological understanding of human beings could in the final analysis serve as an obstacle for the peace process in the Middle East. Embarrassing as it is to admit, I too have to acknowledge the inclination of exporting my own understanding of psychological principles onto the Arab world, and of course expecting a positive outcome.

It just so happened my presence at the conference coincided with the capture of Saddam Hussein. The timing was fortuitous beyond the obvious in the sense it enabled me to discover another form of thinking in the Arab world quite different from what I was familiar with in the West. It appeared one reaction amongst some Arabs involved a feeling of ambivalence. While relieved a dictatorial leader was being brought to justice, there seemed to be a concern that even an Arab tyrant should not be publicly humiliated – this being especially the case at the hands of a Western power.

One woman I talked with about it indicated her displeasure that Saddam’s extended family, particularly the children, would be subjected to endless replays of Saddam’s

disheveled and haggard looking countenance – a shaming experience for any Arab family to experience. The importance of preserving family honor struck me as a critical piece of effective work in this area of the world, and one which so unwittingly from a western mindset could be violated.

As much as the conference expanded my horizons as a psychologist with international interests, and an American one at that, the lingering question remains in force. It is a much tougher arena for psychologists to function in, this being the diplomatic front, than the more familiar terrain of clinical work and research/teaching. It may be the formal invitations some of us keep awaiting may be long in materializing, just as has been the case with the psychiatric hospital referred to earlier.

That some pioneering psychologists and conflict resolution professionals have found workable avenues from which to operate as effective peacemakers (Aoki, 2000; Hanlon, 2003; Kelman, 2000; Salzinger, 2003; Sleek, 1998) says a lot about their tenacity to “stay the course,” even when the progress made may occur on the fringes of thorny “flashpoints” that career diplomats/politicians, government officials and military leaders find so problematic in forging out agreements, deals, cease fires, and diminishment of conflicts.

Still, it is worth noting the research work for this article did not yield any evidence that psychologists and conflict resolution specialists had ever participated directly in the Arab-Israeli negotiations. This absence of involvement was additionally maintained by two presenters of Palestinian-Israeli issues at the International Conference of Political Psychology in July 2004.

This article could not go to “press” quickly enough before my involvement with Middle Eastern affairs would take another unexpected and divergent turn. The Army did in fact decide to call me up for military duty. Rather than to the “sandbox,” as military personnel often refer to the Middle East, my assignment has been to Landstuhl, Germany. The need for psychologists assigned to the outpatient psychiatric wing of the regional hospital has increased. This is due in part to the growing volume of soldiers coming in from Afghanistan and Iraq – Landstuhl being used as a kind of weigh station before soldiers move on to the U.S. or back to their original unit “down range.”

My clinical skills were tested in new ways, such as evaluations conducted by me pertaining to the mental health stability of soldiers pulled from varied operational areas in the Middle East. Determinations had to be made whether such soldiers could return to their units in the Middle East and once again be considered viable team members.

There were also the family members left behind in Germany who struggled in various ways with being separated and uncertain about the future. My schedule two days a week, and subsequently expanded to three days a week, placed me at the Family Health Clinic, Baumholder Army Post where large components of the 1st Armored Division had been deployed to Iraq for a year originally, and then an additional extension for up to 120 days. My caseload there had been primarily comprised of spouses dealing with the stresses of

being apart from their “soldier spouse,” their own mental-emotional struggles, and managing their children alone over this extended time frame. However with the return of most of the Brigade from Iraq in July 2004, I worked more with soldiers adjusting to the very different demands of military life in the “rear.”

The reality of the escalation of tension in Iraq impacted me on two fronts. One front was the steady barrage of media highlighting the mounting drama with religious/political groups such as the Shiites and Sunnis, along with other “flashpoints” like Baghdad, Fallujah, and the January 2005 elections. The other front involved the soldiers themselves landing on the “Landstuhl doorstep,” often with little more than the rumpled uniform they wore during the initial days back and a rather bewildered and lost look in their eyes.

Again the haunting question came back to me in the midst of my daily clinical work with soldiers and family members. It pressed upon me even more pointedly as U.S. soldiers contended with an escalation of insurgent violence against many different individuals and groups considered to be cooperating with the U.S. This personal inquiry seemed to burn in my mind as again the world watched, military and civilian alike, with anticipation and dread that the level of violence and instability in future months could escalate to more tragic proportions. And yes, the Army hospital here in Landstuhl had learned to anticipate heightened trauma - medical and mental health staff alike - soberly prepared for those episodes of an increased volume of physically and mentally compromised soldiers flooding in from “down range.”

Is it possible properly trained psychologists and conflict resolution professionals really could positively impact the outcome of conflicts as primed for protracted bloodletting as with Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian struggle? The best that can be done thus far, it would seem, is to pose the hypothesis with the hope that greater levels of applied research might occur. It can further be hypothesized the area of negotiations most compatible with the training and skills of clinical psychologists and conflict resolution specialists pertains to the “process work” of the talks as opposed to the content domain.

Of course, in order to secure the most meaningful research on this question, psychologists and conflict resolution professionals would need to be brought into the arena as genuine contributors where actual negotiations and decisions are made - ones determining the course the differing sides will take in a conflict. Arriving at this point does not have to be in the distant future, as there remains time for such experimentation even germane to the current conflict in Iraq between the American military, the terrorist groupings, disillusioned Iraqis, factional religious groups, and outside Arab entities.

I have gone through graduate school and practiced as a psychologist during a time when the horizons for psychologically related endeavors has dramatically expanded. This implies a growing recognition that practitioners of psychological principles can positively benefit human enterprises across the spectrum, even with regard to international conflicts and wars.

The American Psychological Association (APA), as noted by Crawford (2003), has highlighted this potential with what is termed “peace psychologists,” recognizing a need for standardizing this area of practice to insure adequate training and expertise. It may be the time is nearing when one of the oldest dilemmas known to humankind – this being intractable conflicts culminating in much bloodshed – will become assessable to the strange, but penetrating tools of psychologists and conflict resolution specialists who regularly practice the art of negotiation, compromise, and identifying with the merits of both sides within the confines of private offices, conference rooms and the like.

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