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## **Dangers and Opportunities in the Role of Religion in the Israel-Hamas War**

*By Nazirudin Mohd Nasir*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*Religion has been appropriated to fuel tension and hatred in the current Israel-Hamas war. This needs to change to give peace a chance, and the resources for peace, reconciliation and compassion in religious traditions are instrumental for such an outcome.*

### **COMMENTARY**

The humanitarian pause in the war between Israel and Hamas provided much-needed relief for the civilians caught in between. It also scaled down the shrill and savage rhetoric issued by both sides since the onset of the war on 7 October. We should seize this moment and redirect attention to bringing about a peaceful resolution. One approach is to learn from the dangers that have transpired thus far.

#### **Use of Inflammatory Religious Rhetoric**

The unfettered use of inflammatory religious rhetoric is of serious concern. It could cause an already explosive situation in the conflict zone to escalate, leading to a spillover of religious tensions in societies elsewhere. The likelihood is very real as religious history, scripture and vocabulary have been appropriated by many parties and in various ways. This is a cruel irony given that religion should be a positive resource for harmony, not a catalyst for conflict and division.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu turned to the Old Testament when he launched the ground assault on Gaza. More specifically, he referred to God's command to King Saul, to punish and kill the people of Amalek for their persecution of Jews. By likening the Palestinians in Gaza to the Amalekites, he framed the Israeli

military response in biblical and religious terms. It was wrong to characterise the Palestinians in this way.

Likewise, moderate figures and institutions in the Muslim world have become much more strident and combative in their condemnation of Israel for its ferocious attack on the Gazans.

In many parts of the Muslim world, anti-Jewish rhetoric is gaining traction and apocalyptic scriptural references are now spreading fast. Last month, a group of Muslim scholars issued a *fatwa* (religious edict) characterising the Israel-Hamas conflict as a religious war and called upon Muslim countries to defend the Gazan people militarily.

This is very worrying. We cannot afford to have a world in which faith communities cite scriptural commands to exterminate each other, because there are also many references to peace, reconciliation and compassion in the scriptures.

Literalist interpretations of religious texts play straight into the hands of extremists. Even Pope Francis remarked recently that the Israel-Hamas conflict had gone beyond war to terrorism.

### **Religious Scripture Calls for Peace and Reconciliation**

Many Muslims understand the evil that is terrorism and have frequently spoken against it. They have been arguably the worst affected every time an Islamist terrorist group strikes, because Islamophobia increases and relations with non-Muslims weaken.

Muslim leaders have also taken pains to point out clearly that extremist interpretations of Muslim scriptures are misguided and misplaced, and that they conveniently ignore their references to peace, reconciliation and compassion. Netanyahu's use of biblical scripture when launching the attack on Gaza was similarly misguided and misplaced. In fact, biblical scholars have called out the error in Netanyahu's reading of the Amalek story, especially in its implied comparison of the Palestinians with the Amalekites. He also seemed oblivious to the core biblical value of compassion.

The scale of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza calls for deep reflection, compassion and hospitality. Abraham, the father of Jews and Muslims, was renowned for his wonderful hospitality. Instead of peddling dangerous and violent narratives, we should emulate Abraham's generosity and charity unto others. On the contrary, with the recent flareup, a solution to the conflict seems more distant than ever.

Although Hamas' brutal attack on 7 October precipitated the current war, Israel's all-out retaliation with scant regard for the safety of innocent Palestinians is creating the worst of perceptions towards itself. For many, Israel is seen as using its superior military power with vehemence to destroy Gaza and its Palestinian population.

### **Going Beyond Self-defence**

Israel's justification, supported by some of its western allies, is that it is acting in self-defence. In and of itself, self-defence is not blameworthy. But destroying hospitals,

refugee camps, schools and places of worship, in what appear as indiscriminate bombings, undermines this narrative.

The current war, and the images of violence and destruction coming out of Gaza, now give the impression that peace with the Palestinians was never really on the agenda. Instead, it suggests Israeli opportunism, which has driven much of the global outrage.

The journey towards peace has to be founded on mutual trust and confidence. Everyone needs to feel safe in the presence of others, even as we are different and live differently. Tragically, this is a far-fetched dream for Palestinians and Israelis today.

### **Co-existence can Prevail**

In Singapore, we live in conditions that others can only dream of, where our religious diversity does not weaken us. We must therefore try harder to make it a reality for others too, because it is not impossible.

Singaporeans, including the Muslim community, are anguished by the war, but on humanitarian and not religious grounds. It helps that the Muslim community's relations with Singapore's Jewish community have been cordial and constructive. Such social and inter-religious capital can tide us over difficult times, such as this, when external conflicts could easily cause misunderstanding and division. Israel's actions have just made our work harder. In fact, the impact of the Israel-Hamas war on Singapore's social cohesion was one of my concerns at its onset.

It was in this spirit that I wrote to the Chief Rabbi of Singapore soon after the outbreak of the war. Some Muslims have criticised me because my letter was not explicit in its condemnation of the Israeli attacks on Gaza. I could have explained my intent more clearly, which was that we should preserve good interreligious relations even as events beyond our borders threaten to divide us, and that we should remain hopeful that our model of peaceful co-existence despite our cultural and religious differences can help other societies to reconsider their own models.

My hope is that the Singapore Jewish community would try to convince the people in Israel that they too can live in peace with Palestinians. Unfortunately, this hope will diminish further and fade away if the crisis becomes protracted and the number of casualties continue to increase.

### **Conclusion**

To give peace a real chance, all parties must refrain from further violence that harms civilians. Israel must cease its indiscriminate attacks on Gaza and respect the sanctity of human life. If not, any residual sympathy for it accruing from Hamas' brutal attacks on 7 October will evaporate. Israel's focus now is to win its war with Hamas, but it may lose its peace with the Muslim world.

For the rest of us, especially faith communities, we need to speak up more in support of peace and to avoid getting entangled in any warped theology fanning conflict and violence. Even as we find ways to manage our sadness and disappointment, let us focus on how we can bring about a better world.

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