



**The Psychological Barriers to Peace:
Curiosity is more Interesting than Blame
(Presentation at the Conference:
Annapolis One Year Later, November
2008)**

The psychological barriers I shall talk about in this presentation are not so much anger or hate or any of the strong negative emotions that are more generally associated with conflict, but the impact of fear and anxiety, and above all victimhood, not only on our perception of reality, but also on the actual reality of those we interact with, both individuals and groups.

The main point I will explore is to what extent our perceptions, or more accurately, our misperceptions, may be contributing to the lack of progress since Annapolis, and whether perhaps by paying attention to these we can find a new opening for a way forward.

This presentation is not offering a solution, only attempting to raise awareness about the psychological barriers, as bringing discussion of them into the discourse is the first step towards unmasking them. Psychological barriers are based on internal unconscious processes, which do not represent external reality, therefore when they are exposed and understood, they start to lose their power, and therefore allow for steps towards the re-establishment of the trust that is needed for progress towards peace.

If you like the paper, then of course that's great, but if you don't like it, then that may also be great as it may be an indication that it has hit a raw nerve somewhere in your unconscious.

Among our basic needs is human security – freedom from fear, freedom from want, and the right to dignity. In a conflict these are absent or at least under threat. There are threats to our property, to our lives. These threats are real, but so also are the psychological barriers that our unconscious needs impose in reaction to these threats.

I will explore three specific barriers:

1. The sense of being a victim or "victimhood", and how this leads to self-righteousness and blaming and pushes the other party into becoming perpetrators.

2. The lens of projection – how we split and project onto others what we cannot accept in ourselves, leading to polarization and demonization.

3. Demonisation and the absence of trust

Finally, I shall consider how the two societies reflect each other in relation to each of these three barriers despite the gross disparity in power, and how therefore we can learn and start to overcome them.

Victims and Victimhood

The conflict permeates the invisible and unconscious as much as, or more than, it permeates the conscious. Even without a conflict, such as the one we live with, life has its difficulties and anxieties with which people have to cope both consciously and unconsciously, such as dealing with difference, or dealing with fear in for instance, the workplace or at school.

In this prolonged conflict there are clearly huge levels of fear and of trauma, especially since the violence that began in September 2000. Although

the daily violence is much less, as the structural violence in the form of the system of walls and problems of house demolitions, permits etc., continues for the Palestinians, the fear and the trauma are always present, and Israelis are never allowed to forget issues of security – always being reminded of fear and of their many traumas. There is a strong link between trauma and the sense of victimhood.

In the wake of massive trauma involving dramatic “losses of life, property, or prestige, and/or humiliation by another group” there is a societal regression that takes place, and this functions to protect or repair a sense of group identity. Societal regression is characterized by, among other things, the loss of individuality, and extensive use of projective mechanisms, leading to a sharp division of “us” and “them”, and a sense of entitlement to do anything in order to maintain its shared group identity. The trauma resulting from the current conflict is superimposed upon historical traumas.

“The term “chosen trauma” refers to an event that causes one large group to feel helpless and victimized by another group. A group does not really “choose” to be victimized and subsequently lose self-esteem, but it does “choose” to psychologize and mythologize—to dwell on—the event – (Volkan)

The Holocaust serves as the chosen trauma for Israelis, while for Palestinians, it is the declaration of the state of Israel in 1948, the “Nakba,” or catastrophe. With new traumas on each side layered over the chosen traumas, each society has become entrenched in a victim mentality as the sense of victimhood develops out of trauma. Thus each side may avoid responsibility for the ongoing violence, the violence having been split off and projected onto the other side, and thus, the cycle of violence continues.

Victimhood, however is pernicious and polarising, as in any relationship, if there is a victim, then there has to be a perpetrator. The victim is stuck in that perception of his/her self, even that definition of themselves or their group. The victim/victim group is all good; it idealises itself and can do no wrong. Therefore they cannot be a perpetrator, they cannot do wrong, and so the blame must always be on the other (person or group). This therefore pushes the other party into the opposite position – that of the wrong-doer. In the extreme case, self-righteousness of the victim/victim group creates a monster out of the other which blocks out the reality, which is inevitably not so black and white.

In fact we are all both good and bad, victims and perpetrators. Perhaps this is easier to relate to in regard to more trivial daily matters rather than situations of war or life and death. For instance, it is easy for a driver to feel self-righteous for staying in lane in a long queue and to feel anger at those who drive past up to the front, creating chaos and making those who stay in line into victims of their selfishness. But maybe there are days when this “victim” is in a hurry and chooses to push ahead with the “bad drivers”, thereby joining the ranks of the perpetrators and maybe or maybe not feeling justified or feeling a bit guilty.

The Lens of Projection

But first, maybe this can be made clearer by exploring the concepts of splitting and projection. Group relations theory, for instance, offers concepts that help us understand the impact of trauma and fear on a societal level. Individuals and groups invoke *defense mechanisms*¹ in order to manage

¹ Defense mechanisms and how they manifest on the individual and group level

intolerable anxiety. The defense mechanisms of splitting and projection in particular, contribute to our understanding of the underlying (often unconscious) psychological mechanisms involved in inter-group conflict.

Splitting is a defensive process in which we gain relief from internal conflicts by dividing emotions into either "all good" or "all bad" parts. We split off parts of ourselves that we consider "bad." Splitting protects us from the anxiety that the conflict of holding both good and bad parts arouses. This is a protective process that happens with both individuals and groups – protective in the sense that if I want to be a good person or believe that I belong to a "good state" or even a state that is morally better than other states, then how can I acknowledge my weaknesses or faults? How can such a state be aggressive or unjust? I have to deny the faults to accommodate my desire to be better, and therefore split the off onto another (opposing) entity, an enemy. This can lead to the extreme thought: *"This enemy is so bad that then he/she should be eliminated."*

Projection is a defense in which an individual disowns, and, then offloads onto someone else, the disowned (split off) feelings s/he is experiencing. Projection is often seen in conjunction with splitting, with the split-off aspects of the self then projected onto another party, because of the induced anxiety of holding onto the feelings oneself. Projective identification is in fact a collusive process between two or more parties. Once the projector has offloaded his intolerable feelings onto another, the recipient of the projection identifies with, and internalizes the

have been written about extensively in the psychoanalytic and group relations literature (see, for example, S. Freud, 1926; A. Freud, 1966; Klein, 1959; Bion, 1961; Ogden, 1965; Obholzer, 1994).

projected feelings as his own. The target of the projection thus changes in response to the projected feeling or impulse. The projector can manipulate or train an individual or group to act according to his projections by himself behaving as *if* those projections are true. For instance - Has anyone ever made you feel stupid by making you feel they see you that way? The "projector" needs to stay in contact with the recipient in order to maintain a connection to the disowned, projected feelings – this is what happens when there is a conflict in a very confined space.

These splitting and projective processes allow an internal conflict to be externalized and located outside the self (e.g., we are good, *they* are evil; we are victims, *they* are perpetrators; we are peace loving, *they* are aggressive; we are heroes, *they* are cowards, etc.). Again, just as individuals utilize defense mechanisms, nations also mobilize social defenses to protect themselves against unbearable feelings and unconscious anxieties (Menzies, 1997). Thus, the complex and ambiguous is made to seem simple and clear (we are good, they are evil) , and the difficult, painful aspects of one's self or one's group are projected onto another group, which then contains those painful feelings/experiences.

In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict such processes have been taken to an extreme, particularly since the second intifada. Each side projects all the evil qualities they cannot own themselves onto the other side; the "violent terrorist Palestinians" or the "wicked Zionist occupiers". In this way, each side is only good, and can justify therefore whatever needs to be done to prevent the others from taking over. Such forms of misrepresentation encourage the populations of both sides to retreat into a siege mentality, which makes conflict resolution, peace talks or negotiations

much more difficult. As is evident from the history of the conflict, those who break with the overall group mentality and seek contact with the other side to explore peace and a better way of life for the protagonists, are all too often perceived and branded, perhaps even attacked, as traitors.

Demonisation and Absence of Trust

The psychological processes described above result in a pervasive lack of trust. Polls taken in August 2002, in the aftermath of wide scale Israeli incursions when the army officially reoccupied Palestinian towns, showed that approximately 72 percent on both sides believed lack of trust to be the most urgent problem.ⁱⁱ This is evident at both the governmental and individual levels, and has if anything become much worse since then. The trust that was said to have been broken at the governmental level was mirrored in a perception of the breaking of trust at the more personal level, as those who had been working together or involved in dialogue withdrew (in the majority of cases at least) within the safety of the confines of their own national groups and severed contacts with others. The relationship between the two sides at the political level tends to be mirrored in the expectations and the attitudes within these groups at the personal level. Each side goes to great lengths to blame the other for the breakdown of the Oslo peace process and especially for the failure of the final meeting at Camp David between Israeli Prime Minister Barak and Palestinian President Arafat, which might have finalized a peace agreement as opposed to a process. There are reflections in the way each side portrays the other, and the forms of blame, which are as indicative of the unconscious group processes of the two sides as they are of the realities,

though this is not to deny the realities and their power.

Of course, the misperceptions and demonisation are partly media induced, and certainly media encouraged, as the media on both sides emphasise the violent, but they are also an inevitable psychological component of conflict with or without the media.

The blaming and the demonization and the negative stereotyping can also be seen as a way of reinforcing a group's identity, (stereotyping helps preserve boundaries and identity and therefore helps people feel secure) especially since having enemies helps hold us together as a group.

To talk about demonisation is not to deny the actual terrible everyday realities. However, many Israelis demonise the Palestinians to the extent that all Palestinians tend to be perceived as potential terrorists, regardless of what they say and do, and even when they dedicate their lives or risk their lives for peace. For instance at a meeting of some of the few peace activists left among the Palestinians with Israelis and Americans for the three-way "Abraham's Path Initiative", an aging Israeli diplomat openly accused one of the Palestinians present of being a terrorist, not because of anything that he had done as a human rights lawyer but on the grounds that he was Palestinian.

The Israelis, for instance, go to the extreme in the portrayal of themselves as "the most moral army on earth"ⁱⁱⁱ and the most caring parents; "*the Israelis see themselves as much more sensitive to the deaths of their children [than Palestinians].*" Instead of sharing in the surge of international sympathy with the Palestinians over the infamous killing of Mohammed Al-Durrah for example, "*In Israel [...] the blame was placed squarely on Mohammed's parents. "The*

father should have lain down his body to protect him," criticized a left-wing Israeli acquaintance, before concluding: "Arabs do not attach the same importance to human life [as Westerners do]."^{iv}

At the same time, not only is there an increase among Palestinians towards religious extremism, and the negative and inflammatory material that is broadcast on the televisions and from the mosques. The repeated images of violence, and calls of incitement against the Zionist enemy, demonize the entire Israeli population. This process has now of course been extended to intra-Palestinian demonisation.

It is not even necessarily that the perceptions are not true, but that they are so monolithic and are perceived as unchangeable. Both sides are projecting the negative consequences that they cannot bear onto the other side, who are "violent", "untrustworthy", "without historical claims." They both oversimplify and project the other as monolithic: "Hamas and the PLO are the same, both wanting only the destruction of the whole of Israel"; "There is no difference between Labour and Likud, they both want to drive out the Palestinians by direct or indirect ethnic cleansing." These oversimplifications, exaggerations and misrepresentations, add to the polarization of the conflict. The majority of Israelis say "we do not have a partner" and show a huge shift to the right. Increasing numbers of Palestinians are now talking about the one-state option – the majority of people on both sides want peace but they do not believe the other side really wants it.

So in terms of the two societies, Israeli and Palestinian, despite the utter inequality in power relations of every kind, the mirror aspects are quite striking, as both claim the moral high ground, both claim to be peace-loving, both claim to honour their agreements in full,

and both claim to be (the only) victims. Perhaps in this mirroring there is an indication about the underlying psychological processes. Perhaps it is via the reflections in the mirror that we can learn about ourselves. Perhaps there is a need to look first of all with clear and wide-open eyes that will see the blemishes and own them.. We have to look at ourselves in the mirror and look at the less attractive bits, the bits we prefer not to see to own our own imperfections. Perhaps then therefore we can learn through curiosity, and learn by looking at what is going on inside our societies. What is more, these reflections imply that we can explore ways in which we can work towards a solution together instead of looking so much towards outside agencies. If all the solutions are outside then we are disempowering ourselves and denying our dignity and humanity. So this paper is an encouragement to look inside ourselves and our societies and see if by making changes, even just being willing to change our attitudes we could start to create a shift in the dynamics of the conflict itself

"If we desire peace, each of us must begin to demythologize the enemy; cease politicizing psychological events; re-own our shadows (those parts of our character we generally don't like to acknowledge – usually our negative characteristics); make an intricate study of the myriad ways in which we disown, deny, and project our selfishness, cruelty, greed, and so on onto others; be conscious of how we have unconsciously created a warrior psyche and have perpetuated warfare in its many modes. (David Bohm, pg. 202)

To sum up; in this conflict that has grown out of terrible traumas, it is only by overcoming the sense of self-righteous victimhood and acknowledging our imperfections – that we can be perpetrators as well as victims, - that we can start to break through the psychological barriers in the conflict.

Without these psychological barriers, perhaps we can then start to pull down the monstrous concrete barriers and get on with building the peace and prosperity we all deserve and long for.

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ii Maryland and SFCG. TITLE, DATE??

iii This is a common epithet attached to the IDF. Ariel Sharon was quoted as saying that the IDF is the most moral army in the world in December 2004, in response to growing reports of the excessive use of force and violations of IDF morals. <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=JPost/JPArticle/ShowFull&cid=1102307126826&p=1078027574097>.

iv Cited in de Prneuf, F. 2000. The Children's War. http://dir.salon.com/mwt/feature/tues/2000/10/17/palestinian_women/index.html.