

Why Palestine is Central to Resolving Islam–West Relations

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When that [conflict in Israel and Palestine] is resolved, what we will find [is] that the tensions between the West and the Muslim world evaporates and that this [conflict] is a saw, chafing, and it's mucking up too many things.¹ (*Archbishop Desmond Tutu*).

Since 9/11 considerable ink has been spilt in trying to explicate the roots of Islam–West tensions. Hundreds of books have been published, numerous academic conferences have been organized and the global media has reported on this subject *ad nauseam*.² Seizing on the importance of this theme for international relations, President Obama, during the first year of his presidency, gave several important interviews and delivered two major speeches from Muslim capitals that sought to reduce conflict between the United States and the Muslim World.³ The topic of Islam–West relations, however, is an old one. It far predates the terror attacks on 9/11 and the ensuing rupturing of relations which the Pew Research Centre in a major 2006 survey called “The Great Divide.”⁴ All of this begs the question: what new information can one bring to the topic that is both substantive and can add a fresh perspective to this troubled relationship?

Following 9/11 a substantial body of influential opinion believed that at root the conflict between Islam and the West was due to a fundamental clash of values. President George W. Bush famously asked, “Why do they

hate us?” The answer he came up with was that “they hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.”⁵ Prominent scholars and public intellectuals such as Samuel Huntington and Bernard Lewis sought to give credence to this perspective with controversial theories on the “Clash of Civilizations” and “The Crisis of Islam: Holy War, Unholy Terror.”⁶ The evidence and arguments for these claims, however, were weak and ideologically motivated. Far more convincing was the Gallup Organization’s massive multi-year research study. Based on a survey of attitudes from tens of thousands of Muslims in 35 countries with a predominately Muslim population, this comprehensive study found that Muslims and Westerners had rather similar values when it came to basic issues of modernity. It not only found widespread support for democracy but also found that substantial majorities in some of the most conservative Muslim societies (73 percent of Saudis, 89 percent of Iranians, 94 percent of Egyptians), believe that men and women should have equal rights and that “substantial majorities in nearly all nations surveyed ... say that if drafting a constitution for a new country, they would guarantee freedom of speech defined as ‘allowing all citizens to express their opinion on the political, social, and economic issues of the day’.”⁷ In short, this study confirmed that most Muslims actually admire the West, in particular its economic development, political freedoms and technological prowess. Proof that this is the case can be observed by visiting any capital city in the Muslim World where often the longest line is outside the United States or Canadian Embassy where people queue in line to obtain a visa to travel to the West, emigrate there if possible or to send their children there to study. What better empirical proof exists to prove that Muslims actually admire, respect and deeply appreciate Western civilization?

How to explain then the ongoing tension between Islam and the West? According to the aforementioned Gallup study, most Muslims stated that “the primary cause of broad-based anger and anti-Americanism [was not due to] a clash of civilizations but [rather it was] the perceived effect of US foreign policy in the Muslim World.” The study went on to conclude that “perceptions of US policy as a form of American neo-colonialism ...

fuels anti-Americanism globally in the Muslim World and beyond and is used by terrorists as they appeal to new recruits. It also diminishes American moral authority in the Muslim World, Europe and other parts of the world.”⁸ To summarize, Muslims do not have a problem the West *per se*, but they are deeply concerned and critical of certain aspects of the foreign policies of many leading Western countries, both of the past and the present which are deemed as unfair, unjust and deeply inimical to the basic human rights and sense of dignity of Muslim communities around the world.

There is one foreign policy position emanating from the West, however, that specifically contributes to this sense of humiliation and injustice. It stands apart from other political issues and it exists in a unique way due to its perception of being particularly offensive and demeaning to Muslim identity: Western policy toward the Israel–Palestine conflict. The main claim of this paper is that the question of Palestine is central to Islam–West relations and that the tension and conflict that exists today between the West and Muslim societies can never be fully resolved until the Israel–Palestine conflict is justly resolved. Those of us who study the Arab-Islamic world and have reflected on Islam–West relations instinctively know that the question of Palestine is a huge part of the problem. It is the proverbial “800 pound gorilla” in the corner that everyone can see, yet to date very few scholars have sought to articulate precisely how and why Palestine/Israel is so central to the relationship and tension today between the West and the Islamic world. This is the task of this paper.

Specifically, I seek to provide a compelling moral narrative rooted in history and politics that precisely explains “why Palestine matters” to Arab and Muslim identity and why no serious “civilized dialogue” between Islam and the West can occur unless the Israel–Palestine conflict is addressed as a central component of this strained relationship. On a side note, interfaith dialogue groups in North America that bring together Muslims, Jews and Christians often face the challenge of dealing with the Israel–Palestine conflict. Inevitably it is often suggested that this topic be taken off the agenda because it too divisive and it will impede a genuine

dialogue. ‘Let us focus on areas of agreement and on broad commonality; the conflict in the Middle East is too emotionally charged to discuss,’ is how this oft-heard argument runs. Such a seemingly innocent yet insidious approach to conflict resolution and interfaith dialogue must be rejected out of hand. To avoid what is most important would be intellectually and morally dishonest. Moreover, it does not address fundamental grievances that are at the root of civilizational tensions in our world today.

*The Erskine Childers Thesis
on Palestine: The Broken Triangle*

To help explain the centrality of the question of Palestine to Islam–West relations, I want to draw upon a metaphor of a “broken triangle.” I am borrowing this idea from an obscure essay written in 1965 by Erskine Childers, an Irish journalist who worked for the BBC and then for the United Nations for most of his life.⁹ Historians and academic experts of the Israel–Palestine conflict will recognize his name. Childers played an early and seminal role in exposing a key myth of the Israel–Palestine conflict promoted by the state of Israel and its supporters. It was claimed that Israel was not responsible for the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in the 1948 war because the Arabs were alleged to have left voluntarily at the urging of neighboring Arab states. When war broke out, the story goes, Arab radio broadcasts urged the Palestinians to leave their homes so that Arab military forces could more easily prosecute the war against the nascent Jewish state. They were to return after the war was over. The implication of this claim was that Israel bore no moral responsibility for Palestinian dispossession and the plight of refugees; the real culprits were the Arabs themselves, Israel’s hands were therefore clean.¹⁰ During this time period, the British government was monitoring all radio broadcasts. Based on a reading of the transcripts and a personal investigation that took Childers to Israel, he found no evidence to corroborate this claim.¹¹ His public exposure of this aspect of the Israel–Palestine conflict, along with the scholarship of Walid Khalidi, were instrumental in contributing to a

later scholarly consensus that the Palestinians were indeed expelled *en masse* in 1948. Arguments to the contrary about “Arab radio broadcasts” exhorting Palestinians to leave their homes was a Zionist fabrication. Thus today, even the former Foreign Minister of Israel Shlomo Ben-Ami is forced to acknowledge that:

It is not at all clear, as maintained by a conventional Israeli myth, that the Palestinian exodus was encouraged by the Arab States and by local leaders. Benny Morris found no evidence to show “that either the leaders of the Arab States or the Mufti ordered or directly encouraged the mass exodus.” Indeed, Morris found evidence to the effect that the local Arab leadership and militia commanders discouraged flight, and Arab radio stations issued calls to the Palestinians to stay put, and even to return to their homes if they had already left.¹²

Erskine Childers’ thesis on “The Broken Triangle” was published in the *Journal of International Affairs* in 1965.¹³ He utilizes the metaphor of this geometric figure to historically explain the Israel–Palestine conflict and as a consequence Islam–West tensions.¹⁴ The three points of triangle refer to the West/Christendom, Zionism/Judaism and the Arabs/Islam. Each axis between the points represents broken relationships in history.

“The Palestine conflict,” Childers observes, “is and always has been a triangular confrontation of the West, the Zionists and the Arabs, but one in which the only real, or ‘two-way’ dialogue has been the Western-Zionist side. It began, however, on a single axis entirely with the Western world—the axis of dialogue between Western Gentiles and Western Zionists.”¹⁵ The reference here is to the history of anti-Semitism in the West dating back to time immemorial and culminating in the horrors of the Nazi holocaust. Medieval Christianity was replete with anti-Semitism; Jews were viewed as killers of Jesus Christ and in 1543 Martin Luther published *Von den Juden und Ihren Lügen* (On the Jews and their Lies) where, among other reprehensible claims, Jews are described as a “base, [a] whoring people, that is, no people of God, and their boast of lineage, circumcision, and law must be accounted as filth.”¹⁶

In Europe during the course of the second millennium Jews were expelled from Britain, France, Portugal, Spain, Germany, Austria and Hungary. While the French Revolution and the Declaration of the Rights of Man sought to liberate Jews from the ghetto and grant them full citizenship, it was a very different story in Eastern Europe. Pogroms against Jewish communities were frequent during the late 19th and early 20th century¹⁷ and it was in this context that Zionism developed. Zionism was one response to the historic problem of Christian anti-Semitism. While some Jews migrated to North America others argued for assimilation and some Jews embraced socialism as a vehicle towards full equality. The movement for Jewish nationalism, however, was ironically aided by the rise of fascism in Europe during the 1930s. With anti-Semitism reaching historic new levels during this period the idea that Jews needed a separate homeland where they could be secure and free became a pressing urgency and attracted more support both among the Jewish diaspora and Western political, cultural and intellectual leaders. In short, the “two-way” dialogue that Childers refers to was a direct by-product of these historical developments. The conversation within the West soon coalesced around the idea of creating a Jewish homeland backed by Western powers in historic Palestine. The famous 1917 Balfour Declaration that committed Britain to this goal encapsulates this moment. This brings us to the second axis in Childers “broken triangle”—the conflict between Zionism and the Arab-Islamic world. According to Childers, “the legacy of this Western anti-Semitism now devolved upon Arab Palestine: the axis of the Gentile–Jewish dialogue was shifted and the Zionist end of it was pegged into that land, the site demanded for Western redemption of Western crimes. This transferred dialogue became one side of the triangle that is now inaccurately called a ‘local’ or ‘regional’ dispute in the Near East.”¹⁸

After World War I the Jewish national movement with support from Britain began to settle in Palestine. While some believed the famous Zionist slogan that Palestine was “a land without a people for a people without a land,” others including the founding father of political Zionism himself, Theodor Herzl, knew there was an indigenous Arab population

that resided there. Nonetheless, Herzl wrote in his diary of “spiriting the penniless population across the frontier”¹⁹ to make room for Jewish immigrants. This reflected the dominant Eurocentric biases of a political movement bent on economic and political expansion and justified as the “white man’s burden” or as the French used to call it the “*mission civilisatrice*” (civilizing mission) of Europe toward the rest of the non-Western world. That Zionism was from its inception a colonial settler movement that looked down on the native population of Palestine was openly acknowledged by the founding fathers of the Jewish state. David Ben Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister, noted that “with compulsory transfer we [would] have a vast area [for settlement] ... I support compulsory transfer. I don’t see anything immoral in it.”²⁰ Moshe Dayan, former chief of staff of the Israeli Defense Forces, Minister of Defense and Minister of Foreign Affairs, was remarkably candid in discussing the origins of the Israel–Palestine conflict. He noted that “it is not true that the Arabs hate the Jews for personal, religious or racial reasons. They consider us – and justly from their point of view – as Westerners, foreigners, invaders who have seized an Arab country to turn it into a Jewish state.”²¹

Recently, considerable effort has been exerted by supporters of Israel to claim that the conflict in Palestine is really a result of enduring Arab and Islamic anti-Semitism and nothing more.²² Yet from any objective outlook such a claim would appear to be spurious as Israeli scholarship concedes. “The fear of territorial displacement and dispossession,” Benny Morris observes, “was to be the chief motor of Arab antagonism to Zionism.” Likewise, in his monumental study of Palestinian nationalism, Yehoshua Porath writes that the “major factor nourishing” Arab anti-Semitism “was not hatred for the Jews as such but opposition to Jewish settlement in Palestine.”²³ In any other colonial context this truism would be patently obvious and claims to the contrary would be dismissed as ludicrous. It would be analogous to claiming that native American opposition to Europe settlement in North America – which was often bloody and violent – was motivated by anti-Christianism, anti-whiteism or anti-Europeanism.²⁴

Over the course of the 20th century the demographics of Palestine were transformed. An indigenous population that was overwhelmingly Arab Muslim and Christian became a minority due primarily to their expulsion and to the influx of new Jewish settlers who colonized the land. It is worth emphasizing that this project happened with strong collusion, support and sustenance from the major Western powers. From the inception of this conflict Western powers were supportive and sympathetic toward the national rights and aspiration of the Jewish settlers who came to Palestine; the rights of the local population who were largely displaced in the process were and still are treated less sympathetically. This clash between Zionism and Palestinian-Arab nationalism was to lead to a major rupture between two of the world's great civilizations: the Judaic and Islamic. It also led to another broken relationship in history that Erskine Childers identifies as the third axis of conflict: Islam–West relations. According to Childers, “British control and the general Western pledge to Zionism in Palestine, at once set up another side of today’s triangle—that of a Western-Arab dialogue.” The reason for this conflict he observes was because:

[the] West was, in effect, asking the indigenous people to acquiesce in their own political extermination and physical eviction in order to enable the West to pay for the crimes of which the Arabs were innocent; crimes committed by the West, in the West, against Western Jews. No other indigenous people has ever been asked to make such third-party payment by obliteration. It can scarcely be held surprising, or immoral, or “unrealistic,” that the Arabs have been refusing to accept such a fate ever since.²⁵

Western Policy and Israel/Palestine

Evidence that Western support for Zionism would lead to a conflict both among Arabs and Jews and between the Islamic world and the West existed from the outset of the Israel–Palestine conflict. Western powers were fully aware of this fact but they chose to ignore it for reasons of *realpolitik* and political expediency. The King–Crane Commission and the

report that was issued under its auspices is worth recalling in this context.²⁶ At the end of World War I the victorious Allies gathered in Paris to divide up the spoils of war. One of the areas in dispute was the Middle East, specifically the Arabic-speaking provinces of the defeated Ottoman Empire. The British and French had struck a secret deal in 1916 to carve up the region but in opposition to their designs stood US President Woodrow Wilson. He arrived in Paris in 1919 and openly challenged British and French intrigue while expressing sympathy for the peoples of the region and for their desire for dignity and national self-determination. Wilson, an idealist in the age of imperialism, advanced a radical and controversial idea—the political future of the Middle East should be tied to the aspirations of its inhabitants. In pursuit of this goal he set up a commission of inquiry, later known as the King–Crane Commission, named after Dr. Henry Churchill King, president of Oberlin College and Charles Richard Crane, a wealthy Chicago businessman, philanthropist and future US ambassador.

After traveling to the Middle East and canvassing public opinion, Crane and King issued a report that remains as relevant today as it was back then. The three critical findings of this study were: 1) a strong desire for full Arab independence, 2) there existed strong local opposition to the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine (where the population was 90 percent Arab) and only “force of arms” could achieve this goal and 3) at the time the United States was held in high esteem and was genuinely popular among Arabs and Muslims.²⁷ The King–Crane Commission revealed that if the people of the Middle East had to choose a global power to act as a trustee during a limited period of transition to self-rule, they would prefer the United States to rule over them. Admiration for the United States at this time was understandable. It flowed in part from the absence of US colonial involvement in the region but also from the first-class hospitals and educational institutions that American missionaries had established there. President Wilson’s support for self-determination at the Paris Peace Conference resonated among the national elites in the Middle East thus contributing to genuine sympathy towards the United States.

The United States was not a major power in the Middle East at the time. Notwithstanding President Wilson's preferences and the recommendations of the King–Crane Commission, the future of Palestine had already been decided by the British. Arthur James Balfour in an internal memorandum to his successor Lord George Curzon, the new British Foreign Secretary, unambiguously confirmed British policy on the question of Zionism and Arab self-determination:

The contradiction between the letters of the Covenant [of the League of Nations] and the policy of the Allies is even more flagrant in the case of the 'independent nation' of Palestine than in that of the 'independent nation' of Syria. For in Palestine we do not propose to even go through the form of consulting the wishes of the present inhabitants of the country though the American [King-Crane] Commission is going through the form of asking what they are ... The Four Great Powers [Britain, France, Italy and the United States] are committed to Zionism. And Zionism, be it right or wrong, good or bad, is rooted in age-long traditions, in present needs, and future hopes, of far profounder import than the desires and prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land.²⁸

Although this statement was issued in 1919 very little has changed during the course of the ensuing 92 years. While it is true that today there is greater support among Western powers for the creation of a Palestinian state, this is conditioned on the Palestinians demonstrating good behavior by first recognizing Israel's sovereignty over most of British-mandated Palestine. This has always been a precondition for Palestinian national rights. In this sense Western policy has been perfectly consistent over the years in elevating the rights to statehood and security for Israelis above those of Palestinian rights. Even today in the context of what is called the "peace process," a clear double standard is apparent. For example, Hamas is barred from recognition and is subject to sanctions until it meets three conditions set by the United States and its European allies: a renunciation of violence, recognition of the State of Israel and a commitment to respect past peace agreements.²⁹ These are perfectly reasonable conditions to

apply against Hamas. If they are met they will certainly contribute to a peace process that could lead to a just and lasting settlement of the conflict. But a reasonable question to ask is: does Israel have to meet the same conditions? In other words, does the United States and Europe also insist that Israel renounce violence, recognize a Palestinian state within its international borders and respect previously signed agreements or do these preconditions apply to only one side of the conflict? Double standards abound. For example, in September 2011 the Palestinian Authority will launch a formal bid for recognition as an independent state at the United Nations. From the moment this initiative was announced the United States has been lobbying furiously to prevent it from happening. The US Senate has passed a resolution condemning this move and threatening to cut off aid while the Obama Administration has promised to veto the resolution at the UN Security Council and the UN General Assembly claiming this it is a “unilateral” action that is unhelpful for advancing peace between Israelis and Palestinians.³⁰

Sixty-four years after the United Nations decreed the creation of two states in Palestine, the United States whole-heartedly supports, sustains and backs the national and human rights of one of the parties to this conflict while blocking the same rights to the other party. While this position raises little controversy in the West, the double standards and hypocrisy are clearly apparent to Arabs and Muslims. A broken relationship in history is the result that coincides with the third axis of Childers “broken triangle.” I am not suggesting here that the Islam–West relations can be reduced simply to the Israel–Palestine conflict. Hypothetically, had the Zionist movement chosen to establish their state in Africa instead of the Middle East there would still be considerable tension between the West and the Arab-Islamic world. I am claiming, however, that the question of Palestine has exacerbated and uniquely contributed to a deterioration of relations between Islam and the West for reasons that will be explored below. Western policy, both in the past and in the present, in terms of its one-sided support for one party in the conflict (Israel) at the expense of the other (the Palestinians) has

exacerbated tensions to a very high level while alienating Muslim public opinion in the process.

Due to the ongoing nature of the conflict, which is now approaching 100 years, every outburst of violence between Israelis and Palestinians widens the chasm between the West and the Islamic world. Consider the 2006 Israel–Hezbollah war or the 2008–2009 Israel– Hamas conflict. In both conflicts more than 1,000 people were killed, mostly Palestinian and Lebanese civilians. When violence broke out a predictable scenario unfolded. The West rallied to the support of Israel, defending its security and its right to self-defense while condemning the Palestinian and Arab side for initiating the conflict. By contrast, the Muslim world rallied to the defense of the Lebanese and Palestinians and strongly rebuked Israel for its use of force. With each passing day the anger and the animosity between both camps increased. Each side looked toward these events through the prism of their own historical approaches to the conflict. While a ceasefire was eventually established and the fighting subsided, a key casualty from these events was renewed enmity along the Islam–West axis. The triangle outlined by Erskine Childers’ triangle was once again complete.

Israel and the Politics of Muslim Identity

But why is the question of Palestine so central to Arab and Muslim identity today? How and why does it uniquely contribute to a rupturing of Islam–West relations? In this section I seek to answer these questions by refuting the claims of Dennis Ross and David Makovsky, among others, who deny any linkage between the Israel–Palestine conflict and broader regional and international issues such as Islam–West relations. Lee Smith, another author who writes in this vein has stated that he “give[s] no credence to the notion that the Arab-Israeli area is the region’s defining issue” but rather it is simply one conflict among many others that plagues the Middle East.³¹ It is precisely this interpretation of the Israel–Palestine conflict that I seek to scrutinize and counter.

Evidence of the importance of the Israel–Palestine conflict and how it affects Arab and Muslim views of the West is available from reputable public opinion surveys. In a June 2008 study by the Brookings Institution, “Does the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict Still Matter? Analyzing Arab Public Perceptions,” Shibley Telhami concluded that despite “the Iraq war and the increasing focus on a Sunni–Shiite divide, the Palestinian question remains a central prism through which Arabs view the world.”³² This study was based on six public opinion surveys from 2002–2008 and involved face-to-face interviews in six countries (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Morocco, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates). The size of the survey ranged from 3,300 to 4,046 participants and it engaged mostly the urban and educated populations of each country. In 2008, for example, this study revealed that 86 percent of the people polled reported that the Palestine question was either the “most important” issue or ranked in the “top three”.³³ In terms of general trends the report noted that the “remarkable thing to observe is that, consistently, two-thirds to three fourths of respondents say this issue remains among the three most important issues in their priorities.”³⁴ More importantly for our purposes, the polling indicated a clear linkage between the Israel–Palestine conflict and Arab perceptions of the United States. “It is clear,” this study observes, “that there is a correlation in the rise and decline of the importance of this issue on two things: the degree of Israeli-Palestinian violence and the nature of the relationship between the Palestinians and the United States.”³⁵

This same study asked what steps Washington could take to improve the respondents’ view of the United States. “More than 60 percent of respondents chose brokering Arab-Israeli peace as the number one answer followed by withdrawal from Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula.”³⁶ In this context the report revealed that “the Arab public consistently and overwhelmingly expressed views that attitudes toward the United States are shaped by American policies, not by American values.” When asked how the Israel–Palestine conflict shapes their views of the United States “more than three quarters say it is at least somewhat important and half or more consistently say it is ‘extremely important’.”³⁷ As one moves outside

of the Arab world toward non-Arab parts of the Islamic world the question of Palestine remains relevant to how Muslims view the West but to a lesser degree. The Gallup Organization's 2002 study "Islamic Views of the U.S.: The Palestine Factor," asked Muslims in nine separate countries the following question: how much does the Palestinian-Israeli conflict factor in fostering residents' negative views of the West and in particular of the United States? The Gallup Poll noted that the data did not allow for any conclusive statements on the topic, however, they did see "statistically significant increases in negative attitudes toward the United States according to respondents' attentiveness to the Palestine issue with an average increase in negative ratings of about nine percentage points across all nine countries."³⁸

Two more recent studies on Islam–West relations also point out the relevance of the Israel–Palestine conflict. "Measuring the State of Muslim–West Relations: Assessing the 'New Beginning'," released in November 2010 by the Abu Dhabi Gallup Center observed that "forty percent of the respondents across 19 MENA [Middle East and North Africa] countries told Gallup that Muslim–West tensions arise more from conflicts about political interests than religious or cultural differences." The one conflict that was pre-eminent was "the Israel–Palestinian conflict and the Palestinians' struggles in Gaza." This report noted that the discontent many people feel that flows from the Israel–Palestine conflict "often plays into the frustration many in the MENA region have with US foreign policy as it relates to the larger Arab-Israeli conflict. These perceptions highlight how the conflict could be seen as a proxy for Muslim–West relations."³⁹

But these polling results still do not answer the question: why Israel and Palestine? Why are Muslims and Arabs so fixated on this conflict? When President Obama travelled to Indonesia in November 2010, Anis Matta, the secretary general of the Prosperous Justice Party, observed that Obama's outreach to Indonesian Muslims would be judged by a single issue. "What will Obama do in resolving the Israel–Palestine conflict? If we don't see any progress [on this issue] what he says is just a speech."⁴⁰ What is truly at the root of the ongoing and harsh condemnation of Israel

by Arab and Muslims for the past 64 years? When viewed objectively this seems to be out of proportion with other political conflicts that affect Arabs/Muslims where there has been large-scale suffering and loss of life. The repeated calls, for example, by Iran’s hard-line president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, that Israel – and no other political regime – “must be wiped off the map” is precisely what I am referring to. Why the Muslim fixation and obsession with Israel? Western commentators and political pundits have provided two different answers in the past.

Some believe that this is simply an affirmation of ancient ethno-religious hatreds that have existed for centuries. This perspective is most often heard in popular culture where it is affirmed that Arabs/Muslims and Jews have been fighting for “thousands of years” and the current conflict is a manifestation of age-old hatreds that defy rational explanation and a solution. The more popular interpretation is that Muslim/Arab criticism of Israel is motivated by anti-Semitism. The excessive focus on Israeli actions and crimes to the exclusion of other heinous crimes and subsequent calls for boycotts against the Jewish State, in the words of *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, is a function of bigotry. “There is only one way to explain those contradictions, sometimes. Not all the time, but sometimes, and that’s anti-Semitism,” he affirmed in a 2006 interview.⁴¹ I am of the view that, contrary to the above, a compelling alternative interpretation exists. Today, as in the past, when Arabs/Muslims comment on Israel they routinely invoke its human-rights record as a justification for their moral censure and rejection of the Jewish state. Given the persistence of this theme in their rhetorical flourishes this appears to be suggesting that Israel is *the* worst human-rights violator in history. The problem with this position is that it is both factually inaccurate and morally dishonest. Yes, when judged by international human-rights standards, Israel’s human rights record leaves a lot to be desired—especially after the 2009 Gaza war where the UN report (also known as ‘The Goldstone Report’) found Israel guilty of “war crimes that may amount to crimes against humanity.”⁴² However, in truth, there have been other human conflicts that have killed more innocent Muslims civilians that do not evoke the same reaction from Muslims. Why?

For example, if human rights is the standard for moral censure why is there no equivalent condemnation from Muslims at far greater human-rights disasters afflicting fellow Muslims in Darfur, Algeria (whose civil war from 1992–2002 killed over 150,000 people), in Chechnya or among the Kurds during Saddam Hussein’s gassing of Halabja in 1988? Why the double standard and the obsession with Israel? In my view the answer lies not in ancient ethnic hatreds or in alleged “Muslim anti-Semitism” but primarily in the trauma and enduring legacy of European colonialism/imperialism in the Muslim World and Israel’s perceived connection with this legacy. For much of the 20th century opposition to European colonialism – and later American imperialism – has been the most powerful organizing theme in the Muslim World. No topic can galvanize and rally the masses more than the issue of national independence, self-determination and repelling external intervention. Such sentiment has dominated the politics of many Arab/Muslim societies for a large part of the 20th century and it has subsequently sunk deep roots within Arab/Muslim political culture. Concomitantly, there is widespread perception among Muslims that had it not been for Western intervention (both in the past and in the present), Muslim societies would have been more internally united, economically successful and politically advanced than they are today.⁴³

What is lost in much of the political commentary on this topic in the West is that Arabs and Muslims perceive Israel fundamentally as a European colonial settler state formed on the ruins of Palestinian society. The occupation of the West Bank and Gaza – now the longest occupation in modern history, with its escalating settlement construction, land confiscation and human-rights violations – serves as a constant reminder of the impact of colonial and imperial policies on the region. In other words, the conflict in Israel–Palestine is perceived from within the Arab-Islamic world as “in-your-face colonialism” not from a bygone era but of the contemporary period. This sentiment has been heightened in popular consciousness as a result of satellite technology (the Al Jazeera effect) that brings the occupation to people’s homes every day, keeping both the horrors of Israel’s occupation and treatment of Palestinians very relevant to

people's lives as well as reinforcing the perceived historical connection to colonialism and imperialism and Western intervention in the Middle East.

Writing in the mid-1960s Erskine Childers picked up on the importance of Palestine for Arab identity. He astutely noted that “it has a moral and emotional scope very considerably *larger* than was evident in the early years following Israel's establishment.” He noted that the Arabs “see the recent history of their region as one of social injustice and exploitation as well as of a more formally political nationalist struggle against Western pressure. Allusion to the conduct of Zionist settlers ... and eventual removal of the mass of Palestine Arabs has become part of one comprehensive retrospect that embraces landlord-domination in Egypt or Iraq and *colonial*-domination in the Maghreb.” The “story of Palestine is one of moral contradiction on so great a scale as to make them burn with anger.”⁴⁴ These views have only intensified in the intervening years as popular sentiment in the 2011 ‘Arab Spring’ has revealed.⁴⁵ The impact and legacy of colonialism also explains why there is widespread sympathy for the plight of Palestinians in much of the developing world. Asians, Africans and Latin Americans instinctively relate to Palestinian victimization because of its similarity to their own colonial and imperial experiences. Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress, for example, were strong supporters of the Palestinians both during the apartheid era and afterward for precisely this reason.

The fact that the final borders of Israel–Palestine remain to be determined, that the conflict is ongoing and that most of Israel's political leaders have been Europeans and that Israel is generously supported by the leading global power (the United States) gives the Israel–Palestine conflict a decidedly colonial spin—that of powerful white Europeans versus a subjugated indigenous population stealing their land, humiliating them and denying their political aspirations. The Third World has seen this script before and experiences Palestinian suffering with a sense of *déjà vu*. The unresolved conflict in Israel–Palestine, therefore, acts as a constant reminder of the carve-up, humiliation, defeat and setback faced by Muslim societies as a result of Western intervention. The American occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan – and threats of a possible military

strike against Iran's nuclear facilities – serve to exacerbate these feelings. Palestine, in a very real sense, has now morphed into a core “identity issue” for Arabs and Muslims precisely because of its perceived link to the 19th and 20th-century Middle Eastern experience with European colonialism. For most Arabs/Muslims today, accepting the legitimacy of the state of Israel while the Palestinians remain largely a refugee population is tantamount to giving colonialism a moral stamp of legitimacy. No self-respecting Arab or Muslim can easily do this; if they were to try, they would likely be morally ostracized and condemned by their own communities.

Conclusion

Edward Said, the late Palestinian-American intellectual, once referred to the Palestinians as the “victims of the victims.”⁴⁶ He was referring to the fact that the historic victims of the Christian West, the Jews, were now victimizing a new population and creating new victims, the Palestinians. This interconnected view of history is precisely what Erskine Childers was seeking to demonstrate with his theory on Palestine and the “broken triangle.” As I have tried to demonstrate in this paper, the question of Palestine cannot be understood simply as struggle between Jewish and Arab nationalism but it must be comprehended historically and interdependently. One historic conflict in one part of the world was transferred to another region leading both to new conflict among a group of people who previously had co-existed (Jews and Muslims) along with new frontiers of conflict between civilizations that were already in tension (Islam and the West). Islam–West relations took a turn for the worst during the modern period and the era of colonialism and imperialism was a new low point for this relationship. But after World War II, when the West began to withdraw from the Middle East, the creation of the state of Israel on the ruins of Palestinian society – and with full backing of the Western powers – effectively meant that the era of external intervention in the region did not end. The ongoing nature of this conflict has turned the question of Palestine into a key identity issue for Arabs and Muslims

today. It serves as a constant reminder of past injustices and humiliation that the region has suffered at the hands of Western powers. It is for this reason that the Israel–Palestine conflict is central to resolving Muslim–West relations. Until and unless this happens, a reduction in Islam–West tensions is wishful thinking.