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Dissonance in the Mideast

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A man died recently. A bomb blew up in his hands. He was probably a Hamas militant who was preparing for a suicide attack against an Israeli target. In Qiryat Sefer, a Palestinian was shot and killed during a violent protest. And Islamic Jihad may well be continuously engaged in preparing attacks to avenge the killing of its leader, Fathi Shiqaqi. But in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank the dissonance is deafening. For there is silence. At least by Mideast standards. But should there be?

There are still significant controls by the Netanyahu administration on border crossings into Israel. Economic conditions are still depressed by Israeli decisions on currency, import, export, and the border controls. A decision to reallocate Israeli forces and delineate new security procedures in Hebron remains elusive. Animosities still linger from recent fighting between Israeli and Palestinian forces, ostensibly over Israeli civic decisions on Jerusalem. And then there are earlier realities as still-burning memories which can never disappear. Wars. Deaths. Torture. Imprisonment. Innumerable indignities. And the ultimate reality. Two groups of people--perhaps, nations, perhaps not--believing they have sacred, secular, and eternal rights to the same land.

To this, add recent Israeli decisions to enlarge settlements in the West Bank. Defense Minister Mordechai has authorized construction of 1800 new apartments in Qiryat Sefer and 1100 new housing units and several public buildings in Immanuel. Pending his approval, the Israeli military administration has supported the construction of 2000 more in other settlements. Prime Minister Netanyahu has promised to seek approval for 3500 additional housing units. And Minister of Infrastructures Sharon has proposed to expand a cluster of settlements west of Ramallah.

Yet the 1993 Israeli-Palestinian accords initiated in Oslo still limp on. There is no new intifadah. There is no mass rioting or demonstrations by the standards of Israeli-Palestinian relations. The base rate of terrorist activities by Hamas, Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad, Israeli settlers, and fronts for the PLO and Palestinian National Administration seems no higher than usual, perhaps because of effective antiterrorism and counterterrorism efforts by the Israelis.

Part of the dissonance may be explicated by an aptly named psychological construct--cognitive dissonance. This construct denotes a conflict within a person, a conflict generated by harboring mutually inconsistent cognitions, an inconsistent cognition and behavior, or two inconsistent behaviors. The inconsistency not only generates psychological conflict, but a pressure, a motivating force to attenuate this conflict.

And to attenuate this conflict, a person must modify one of the inconsistent cognitions or behaviors. For example, one who has received a very low wage for an unattractive job may experience conflict and resolve it by deciding that the job is more attractive than initially believed. Or the wage is actually more attractive. Only if the conflict cannot be satisfactorily resolved in this manner will a person engage in a more extreme activity and quit the job, strike, seek to hurt an employer, or damage the place of employment.

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A more novel perspective on cognitive dissonance is that a pair of inconsistent cognitions or behaviors may place people at varying distances from the threshold of extreme behavior. And some may attempt to resolve conflict generated through many pairs before reaching the threshold. Others are already close or already there. Still others differ in that they resolve dissonance among three or more cognitions and behaviors concurrently.

In this regard, it may be less dissonant that there are Palestinian laborers--even some hailing from areas which the Israelis have expropriated for settlements--who are supplying the muscle, sweat, and know-how to build the new housing assets for settlement expansion. Are they illustrating a cruel inversion of one of Marxism-Leninism's alleged dicta? That as capitalists may sell the rope used to hang themselves so, too, do proletariats sell the labor used to control them through false consciousness? Are they merely the perennial collaborators, the Quislings or Vichy supporters of their time? Perhaps they are merely engaged in dissonance reduction. That is, they are resolving the conflict generated by the inconsistent cognitions of (1) desiring to contest settlement expansion which threatens their families, (2) realizing that contesting what threatens their families will also threaten their families through more stringent Israeli security procedures, and (3) being aware that aiding the Israelis in settlement expansion threatens their families in the long term but helps their families in the short term through increased pay. Perhaps, the perceived value for these laborers of increased pay may be increased, the threat to families of expansion decreased, the threat from more stringent security procedures increased.

However, the careful reader now may observe a significant problem with cognitive dissonance theory. One may ascribe any number of conflicting cognitions and behaviors to just about anyone. Even with supporting data from self-report, colleagues and acquaintances, and written documents, one's own attribution processes--not those of people being analyzed-- may still be paramount in identifying which of all cognitions and behaviors are judged salient in a specific situation. Moreover, interactions with observed emotional status and dynamics can further complicate the analysis.

Even if accurate, cognitive dissonance theory also suggests that the seemingly dissonant behavior of some Palestinians, the way they are resolving their dissonance, and the dissonance analysts may feel as they observe ongoing events, are in flux and capable of sudden reversal. And, of course, all of this presents opportunity for exploitation by many with unsated needs for power, be they operatives of Hamas or Israeli settlers. Therefore, the dissonance of relative nonviolence in the Mideast may not last for long. (See Greenberg J. (November 15, 1996.) Israelis break ground for expansion of settlements. *The New York Times*. (<http://www.nytimes.com/y...rld/israel-westbank.html>.) Wicklund, R. A., & Brehm, J. W. (1976.) *Perspectives on cognitive dissonance*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.) (Keywords: Cognitive dissonance.)