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THE ORIGIN OF THE PRESENT CRISIS IN WORLD HISTORY AND ITS LESSONS

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Introduction

Political economy, as distinct from economics, emphasizes the problem of the organization and control of the economy, i.e., the structure of power. Not only are conclusions pertaining to economic welfare dependent upon organizational and structural variables—e.g., in the determination of whose preferences and interests are to count, and how much—but organization and structure are objects of control, precisely, in part, because they govern the distribution of economic welfare. Accordingly, struggles for power take place in all societies, and within states and between states.

One important concept in which much of the foregoing has been encapsulated is *imperialism*. That concept—including the further concepts of the structure of power, organization and control, and whose interests are to count—is at the heart of this essay and its companion essay (Samuels 2004), although I have made it explicit only in the latter.

This essay deals with the predicament—for the Middle East and for the world—posed by Israeli-Moslem relations and the role therein of the United States. This is clearly a struggle for power—power narrowly considered. More broadly, it is a resumption of the millennium-old conflict between Hebraic-Christian civilization and Islamic civilization—another predicament. Thus it is also a clash of religions and cultures—power broadly considered.

The companion essay dealt with the role in the world of the United States as the only so-called superpower, a superpower with interests it wants to project elsewhere

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and now a superpower exposed to non-state guerilla-type attacks.

I use the term “power” here precisely as I have in the past in other connections: participation in decision making (which may be deliberative and/or non-deliberative) and the bases thereof (Samuels 1992). Power is sought either to pursue particular substantive ends or to give effect to identity or ego gratification. Any particular conflict, such as that between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, is an amorphous admixture of motivations, a mixture whose elements—religious, political, cultural, and economic—in the case of particular individuals are difficult if not impossible to identify and measure unequivocally. This is true of both the individual actors themselves and analysts.

As in the case of economics, it is difficult to pursue political economy in a non-normative manner. In what follows I hope by the use of language to have made clear when I am describing, when I am positing a normative premise, and when I am prescribing.

The topics covered here and in the companion essay are, to put it mildly, tendentious. Because, in part, of the Holocaust, it is difficult, especially for a Jew, to treat Israel in a purely objective manner. Because the United States was arguably the first great liberal democratic state and its people enjoy both a high standard of living and relatively abundant and meaningful civil rights, it is difficult to treat it in a purely objective, or even a critical, manner. Because one abhors the events of 11 September 2001—and honors those who followed the injunction “Let’s roll,” in order to thwart one plane’s hijackers, along with Nathan Hale’s regret that he had only one life to give for his country and with the response “Nuts” to the German demand for surrender during the Battle of the Bulge—it is difficult to treat the perpetrators, for analytical purposes, in an objective manner.

But the policy analyst must think clearly. He or she must recognize that an assassination did not cause World War I: The assassination took place within a vast, if hitherto non-military contest for the control of Europe. He or she must recognize that the attack on Pearl Harbor was not an isolated event, but took place within a contest for the control of Asia and the Pacific.

Thinking clearly does not mean treating all sides and all policies equally. The policy analyst must be relativist. The relativist does not emphasize that one cannot choose sides but that one must examine alternatives objectively and that one must and indeed does choose. The relativist policy analyst balances two things: his or her choice between combatants, and his or her analysis of “terrorists” and “freedom fighters.” The relativist policy analyst appreciates how one person’s terrorist is another’s freedom fighter, and vice versa, and that they, too, are included in *governance*, as opposed to government—something the fanatic on either side cannot or will not fathom (Samuels 1995, 2001, 2002).

I. The Origin of the Present Crisis

There is no one preeminent cause of subsequent events; nor can one trace as yet unknown remote future consequences to selective contemporary events. Yet one can, if best in retrospect, identify certain lessons from the past.

During some point in the post-World War Two period it became reasonably clear that the origins—the seeds, as they were often called—of World War Two resided, to no small but still specifically immeasurable degree, in the treatment of Germany in the Treaty of Peace after World War One. It was, perhaps, not inevitable that reparations, coupled with hyperinflation, would engender the conditions that led to the rise of Adolph Hitler. The lesson—if only one of risk rather than of ineluctable

fate—was thereby learned that led to a very different policy toward Germany after World War Two.

Instead of backward-looking punishment, the policy of the conquering nations became forward looking, for the most part, that of enabling the reintroduction of Germany into the European economy and family of nations. The situation was complicated, to be sure, by the division of Germany into West and East and by new preoccupations with the Cold War. Indeed, the Western attitude and policy toward West Germany derived from the Cold War and the need for West German participation in the front against the Soviet Union and its satellites/allies.

While all this was going on, the seeds of the next great crisis in world history were sown.

The problem, as it were, was what was to become of the Jewish survivors of the German “final solution.” Widespread anti-Semitism—of which German policy was the most virulent form—was coupled with other exacerbating factors: a desire, in a war-tired world, not to have to face up to a vexing problem; the historically close relationship of Great Britain, one of the victorious allies, to the “Palestine problem;” the almost-immediate outbreak of the Cold War; and so on. All these circumstances combined to produce a vacuum and thence a failure of enormous proportions.

Great Britain was caught in a predicament of its own making. A modern imperial power, it (like Belgium, France, et al) sought to whitewash its more or less but nonetheless ever-present repressive and exploitative policies with the rhetoric of nation building. Very few of its colonies, perhaps only India, really were able to assume serious self-government after decolonization and independence was brought about. No doubt, this was partly also because colonial borders were meaningless in relation of ethnic/tribal groupings. Palestine, technically not a British colony, only a

protectorate under the League of Nations, was for Great Britain a problem and not an opportunity. But it was a problem related to an opportunity, the latter being good relations with the Arab states—a situation whose centers of gravity were European balance-of-power considerations and access to oil.

Into this situation came an invigorated, bellicose and eventually successful, Zionist movement. The movement itself, it now seems evident in retrospect, was not homogeneous. Among the leading elements were the reawakened Biblical promise of a Jewish homeland; the idea of a Jewish homeland as a bastion of security in a dangerous world; and other dreams of various sorts, including those of a secular labor-oriented or socialist state and of a Hebrew theocracy. Zionism united these and other motives and derived its strength from them.

Britain treated the Palestine problem, its Jewish problem, in much the same way that it handled other foreign affairs of state—as an imperial power. It did not seriously take up the question of state making. Any element of state making entered largely as a derivative of Britain seeking its interests and in its playing Moslems and Jews against one another.

Nor was the role of any other nation, not least that of the United States, any more affirmatively constructive. Other nations were quite happy, on the one hand, to attend to their own problems and, on the other, to leave the matter of Palestine to Great Britain.

The result was the successful insurrection of the Jews against the British overlords and the establishment of a Jewish state, Israel, in Palestine.

But Palestine was not an otherwise empty land. Palestinian Arabs, largely Islamic, also lived there—and they had fellow co-religionists in neighboring states. The result was series of Arab-Israeli wars and a general policy by Israel with which it treated the Palestinians in much the same repressive and exploitative way that

Hitler had treated the European Jews. I say much the same and not the same because the Jews have not undertaken against the Palestinians the systematic murder and extermination that constituted the Holocaust. Yet even that is laden with irony. First, the Israelis seemed to have learned nothing from the Holocaust about the moral and humane treatment of other people. Second, the Palestinian refugee camps, marked by squalor and despair, have generated an anti-Jewish fundamentalism and fanaticism similar to that which fed the Holocaust. And third, the anti-Israeli fanaticism threatens its own Holocaust.

The seeds of World War Two were inadvertently sown by the aggressive policies built into the Treaty of Versailles. The seeds of the present predicament—that burgeoning conflict between Western civilization and Islamic civilization—were inadvertently sown by passive policies that, in effect, allowed Zionism to take upon itself the problem of state making in Palestine, now Israel. However, such state making was an effective monopoly of the new Jewish state; and its policies were, in part, calculated to foreclose the development of a rival Palestinian entity.

The passive policies were not only those of the United States and the nations of Europe. They were also those of the Arabic states in what was soon called the Middle East. If the Palestinian cause was a thorn to the Israelis, it was likewise one to the established Arab states.

In short, no one—except the Israelis and eventually the Palestinians—was interested in state making in the area, and until recently the balance of mutual coercion in the area was enjoyed by the Israelis.

One cannot say with any degree of confidence what would have happened if the Allies had attempted to work out a solution more or less mutually satisfactory to the Palestinian Arabs and the Israelis, say, before the insurrection against Britain. It is quite likely that no

permanent peaceful solution would have proven feasible. In that case, the better part of wisdom might have been the non-triumph of Zionism. What the frustrated Jews would have done, one can only guess. In another scenario—of which there are many—Jews and Palestinian Arabs, and perhaps other Arab states, might have been able, under the auspices of a post-World War Two conference, to work out a feasible solution—before Arab frustration took hold. A further complicating and exacerbating factor was for many years the policies of the Soviet Union, which sought to extend its influence in the region.

One can say with a reasonable degree of confidence, however, that the result effectively engendered by the triumph of Zionism coupled with the antagonism of the Moslem world, facilitated by the passive and hardly benign neglect by the nations of Europe, has led to the present situation.

Ironically, only the United States, in various administrations, has made serious and continuing efforts to bring about a peaceful solution in the Middle East. Yet the irony deepened. The initially precarious position of Israel, undergirded by the moral sentiments of a liberal democratic society and by the influence of the Zionist movement in American politics, led the United States pretty much to give Israel a blank check in matters of domestic policy. Neither Hebrew religious fundamentalists nor the settlement policies of a series of Israeli governments were ever seriously or effectively called into question. Yet it was the former which led to the latter and it was the latter, coupled with other policies, which led to the inability to work out a peaceful solution.

The lesson of the Treaty of Versailles was that in modern times former enemies should, to the advantage of all nations and peoples, be encouraged and facilitated to reenter the family of peaceful nations and to follow a

policy of live and let live. The failure of the post-World War Two period was that European reconstruction and state making included neither the Jews nor the Arabs.

Again, one cannot say how much peaceful equilibrium could have been achieved, and for how long, as between Judeo-Christian and Arab-Islamic civilizations, between modernist Western nations and mediaeval nations. But the situation could hardly be worse than it has become. The situation is so bad that it has led some people openly to state, if sometimes ironically, how much better life and the prospect of the future was during the later years of the Cold War—even with, indeed perhaps because of, the policy of mutual assured destruction (MAD) pursued by rational, non-fanatic decision makers.

Can the situation be reversed? Is it too late?

II. Solutions

It may well be too late. But if there is to be a chance for reversal, something like the following may be required.

All peoples and nations will have to understand that ideology and religion are not given and absolute but are objects of social construction. There is no “true” form of any religion, only various competing uses to which a religion may be put. No one declarer of the meaning and application of a religion derives same only from the religion itself; each, rather, would restate, redirect and reconstruct the religion to suit their own purposes and selective understandings. All peoples and nations will have to understand that political claims stated in ideological and theological or religious terms are not necessarily superior to other modes of making claims, but are selective quests for power, however well meaning or not, garbed in the vestments of religion. All peoples and nations will have to understand that

explanations of secular and natural phenomena stated in ideological and theological terms are not necessarily more correct than nonreligious explanations. All people will have to cease intruding politics into religion and religion into politics, no longer using the other for their own secular purposes. All peoples and nations must cease making invidious comparisons between their own and other civilizations. All peoples and nations will have not only to reckon with their neighbors but understand that it is both morally desirable and in their respective interests to do so. All peoples and nations must follow a policy of live and let live toward their neighbors.

All peoples and nations must make serious and sincere, well-funded efforts to promote understanding of both other peoples and the grievances of other peoples.

All peoples and nations must be open to the operation of the principles of approbation and disapprobation by which critique of their organization and behavior may be rendered.

All peoples and nations must be subject to international rules and adjudication of conflicts—between nations, between ethnic groups, between other groups—all conducted in such manner and with such results as to prevent and resist organized violence.

The Israelis will have to cease justifying and believing in the justification of their policies in terms of propositions either found in or derived by interpretation of the Old Testament.

They must fundamentally transform their attitude toward and relationship with the Palestinians.

They must cease the policies that treat the Palestinians and other Moslems as if they and their interests did not count.

They must reverse the policies of successive Israeli governments that have sought to dominate and oppress the Palestinians.

They must seek to redress the Palestinians' grievances, whatever the Israelis' own. How they do this, with what degree of disclosure, in what steps, etc. cannot be spelled out in advance but must be negotiated in good faith.

They must cease the fanaticism that is calculated to prevent mutual accommodation of interests. The present Israeli government must cease taking advantage of the actions of Hamas and other groups in order to avoid working out a solution to the situation. The government's actions have played into the hands of Hamas and the actions of Hamas have played into the government's hands.

Not the least negative contributing factor has been the policy of settlements; but there have been others. The policy of settlements must be reversed; the settlers, whose presumably well-meaning intentions have been deployed in pursuit of a policy of delaying the reaching of accord with the Palestinians, must be both made to see this and helped to adjust. Similarly, displaced Palestinians must be meaningfully assisted; the doctrine of a policy of return must apply to Jews and Palestinians alike, not unequally in pursuit of an electoral majority.

The Israelis must acknowledge what they already know, that if the situation were, somehow, reversed, the Israelis would act—as they did in the case of Great Britain—pretty much as the Palestinians and their ostensible allies do today.

Israel must reverse its policies toward the Palestinians. If Israeli policies are changed, the effort may fail, it may succeed. To undertake such a reversal will take much courage, it will involve a fundamental change in the politics of Israel. It will involve having to work out solutions to a host of collateral problems and future developments of which no one can as yet be cognizant—including the possibility of dangerous behavior by hitherto implacable enemies. To not reverse

course, however, is to invite the return of the Dark Ages. To reverse course is still to risk that return but it also can enable its avoidance.

If Israeli policies are not changed, the results will be dire and our future is doomed. Part of that future will be the attribution of blame to Jews and Israel—with enough apparent evidence to render the attribution seemingly unequivocal. The renewed and exacerbated warfare between Judeo-Christianity and Islam will be traced, in no small part to Jews.

The Islamic peoples will have to cease believing in the justification of their policies in terms of propositions either found in or derived by interpretation of the Koran.

They must fundamentally transform their attitude toward and relationship with the Israelis and other nations.

They must cease the policies that treat the Israelis and other peoples as if they and their interests did not count.

They must seek to redress the Israelis' grievances, whatever the Palestinians' own. How they do this, with what degree of disclosure, in what steps, etc. cannot be spelled out in advance but must be negotiated in good faith.

They—including Hamas, etc.—must cease the fanaticism that is calculated to prevent mutual accommodation of interests.

They must take seriously and seriously study the critique of Islamic civilization rendered by modernist civilization, in a spirit of live and let live.

The United States—and, *pari passu*, all other nations—will have to continue the policy of guaranteeing the existence of Israel, with a view that the need for such a guarantee will atrophy as a new and peaceful order is constructed in the Middle East.

The United States and other countries will provide economic and other assistance to the Middle Eastern countries in such manner as seriously and sincerely

promises to promote broad-based economic development.

The United States will not support Israeli policies that oppress the Palestinians and/or function to delay peaceful mutual accommodation of interests; indeed, the United States will withhold assistance to any nation that manifestly oppresses its neighbors and seeks to delay peaceful mutual accommodation of interests, even at the price of sacrificing other interests by the United States. This includes the Israeli policy of settlements.

The United States, in particular, must take seriously, and seriously study, the critique of its policies and civilization by other nations and civilizations, in a spirit of live and let live.

The United States has long been the harbinger and symbol of liberal democratic society. The spirit of its constitution has been widely emulated. The life of its people has been widely sought by generations of immigrants. That the United States, through often well-meaning but ill-conceived policies, has gained the fanatical enmity of large numbers of people must give it cause to reconsider those policies and the manner in which they are adopted and deployed.

III. Prospects

None of the foregoing reduces, for any nation, to a readily available black box, calculus, or litmus test by which policy may be determined. Identifications of problems and of solutions to problems, and hosts of problems of means-ends relations, will still have to be worked out. Such, one hopes, will be facilitated by a truly informed citizenry, not one deluded into thinking either that collective life is necessarily in conflict with individual autonomy or that only one blueprint for collective life is proper.

The chances of realization for most if not all of the foregoing, however, are slim. The seeds for further conflict have already been sown, and they likely will be expanded through both further actions of commission and of omission. The foregoing is largely wishful thinking.

We have more or less vague ideas of the actual intentions of the various parties to the conflict. And intentions pale before unintended consequences. The goal of Osama bin Laden and others may be the removal of non-Islamic foreigners from Saudi Arabia, the ouster of the current Saudi regime, the capture and control of Middle-East oil, the radicalization of Moslem populations and governments by Islamic fundamentalism, the reversal of a millennium of felt Islamic repression at the hands of predominantly Christian countries, retribution for Israeli and U.S. Middle-East policy, and so on. Even if any of these are not intended they well may become—indeed to some extent have already become—the unintended consequences of past policies.

It well may be too late; the seeds planted during the last half-century are germinating. But it is not too late to try to reverse matters.

The U.S. must continue to support the existence of Israel. Any anti-Zionist sentiment to the contrary is wishful thinking. But it need not continue to support any and all of the misguided policies of the Israeli government. That government must be taught that it is in the interests of the Israelis themselves and of many other peoples—including the U.S.—for Israeli policy toward the Palestinians to be reversed.

That such policy reversal by the U.S. is one of the goals of the Islamic fundamentalists does not make it wrong. They have also objected to the U.S. acting, in its own view as a superpower, as a world-class bully—and many Americans have thought so also, just as many

Americans, including many Jews, have found Israeli policy toward the Palestinians to be repugnant.

Nor should such policy reversal by the U.S. be accompanied by forgiveness of what happened on September 11, 2001. The U.S. can and should wield its big stick in such cases. The U.S. also can and should show that it is big enough and confident enough to admit to past mistakes.

One of those mistakes was the error of omission in which no effort was made to organize post-war reconstruction in the Middle East. The U.S. should promote such reconstruction under the auspices of an international agency. Some or much of the financing should come from revenues from the sale of Middle-East oil. If western capitalism is not to the liking of Islamic peoples, they can try to tone it down and accommodate it to their religion. They can also do one other thing: They can remove and replace regimes in which mediaeval rulers and ruling families treat national resources as their own and ignore the poverty of their people while they live in regal splendor.

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