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The heresy of equivalency

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The heresy of equivalency

Israelis and Palestinians, and their friends, take unique umbrage at anything that suggests equivalency between them

If there's one kind of argument that's guaranteed to lose friends and annoy people on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian divide, it is anything that attacks binary notions of difference and points out areas in which the two sides and their partisans think and act in very similar ways. In recent years, I've found myself increasingly attracted to frameworks that invariably end up highlighting what the parties have in common rather than what separates them. And in the process, I've discovered that while there is little that is more revealing about the underlying structures of the conflict – which are not so much binary as mutually reinforcing – there's also nothing more provocative than pointing this out.

It's the ultimate heresy, because it cuts through the fog of ideology and into the underlying realities in a way that disrupts the easy assumptions that ensure the conflict continues no matter what.

First, it's counterintuitive. These are, after all, supposed to be two radically different peoples and cultures, at loggerheads because of these same differences. Pointing out how their attitudes, policies, narratives, rhetoric, and behavior can often mirror each other and – more than just re-inscribing a self-reinforcing binary – often seem entirely analogous, profoundly challenges that sense of radical alterity. It suggests that beneath the surface there is a deep similarity in attitudes and behaviors at work, and this seems the ultimate in intolerable speech to partisans on both sides.

I find that whenever this gesture is deployed, partisans sputter with anger that anyone could compare the two at any level. They typically resort to arguments about what one hasn't mentioned, and all the important things that actually define the fundamental, irreconcilable differences. In order to re-establish the binary, they seem to feel it is crucial to reassert the truth-value of their own narrative in stark contrast to that of the other. And if you have challenged this, you must be up to no good.

Second, it threatens the sense of moral superiority that pervades attitudes on both sides. This means it's not just extremists who become annoyed with such arguments. It can often be people well within the

mainstream of pro-Israel and pro-Palestine discourse who take umbrage at any sense of "equivalency," especially "moral equivalency."

It appears to be vital to believing in their causes to rest on an unshakable foundation that there is something inherently morally superior to the Palestinian or Israeli position. And any suggestion that these positions can often actually look very similar, and mutually self-reinforcing, when closely examined is the ultimate heresy. Any argument that begins to look like it's proposing a kind of "moral equivalency" can be guaranteed to draw equally passionate condemnations from partisans on both sides, and not just extremists either.

"Moral equivalency" is rejected by both sides in the same way they both assert "double standards." At many levels there may not be moral equivalency in any given aspect of the situation, and there are always double standards. But when moral, behavioral, or intellectual equivalency can be found as, on close examination, it very often can, it's highly revealing about the political trap in which Israelis and Palestinians find themselves caught together.

The howls of outrage are entirely predictable, and they are not just based on mythology but real differences. The parties are not, in fact, the same. Israel is a powerful and well-functioning state with highly-developed bureaucratic systems, laws, and structures. Palestinians are a disempowered and occupied people, fragmented into many parts, and they lack all of those system. Israelis and their friends therefore recoil at being compared at a fundamental level to Palestinians who they see as intolerant, violent, and impossibly recalcitrant. Meanwhile, Palestinians and their friends reject any notion of symmetry with Israel, which they see as racist, colonialist, and impossibly irredentist.

"How can you compare us to those people? How can you compare democratic, responsible Israel to the Palestinians with their 'culture of hate' and 'traditions of terrorism?' Really, the other side says? Here we are, colonized, abused, discriminated against, dispossessed and under constant attack, and you want to compare us to them? How can you compare a tolerant democracy to a group of angry and probably anti-Semitic people with the terrorist mentality? How can you compare the occupiers with the occupied, the victimizers with the victims?"

In unison, both sides rise to simultaneously reject any notion that there might be a fundamental symmetry between them at a certain register, at least in terms of attitudes and behaviors that reinforce conflict and undermine peace. And they're all correct, of course. Israel and Palestinians are not the same people and there are major differences between them. This is understood by everybody from the outset.

The point is not to suggest that there aren't any differences. That would be ridiculous. It's to deliberately notice the numerous instances of echoing and mutual-reinforcement that seems to pervade and almost define the conflict just below the surface. It's to challenge the partisans on both sides to recognize that beneath their differences, they have often adopted analogous mentalities that reinforce rather than undermine conflict and make peace far more difficult.

Of course Israelis and Palestinians are not in the same position at any real register. But when two peoples in such different manifest circumstances seem so often to mimic each other at a latent level, when they seem to collaborate in, if nothing else, analogous behaviors and attitudes that perpetually reinforce each other and re-inscribe the basics of the conflict, pointing this out appears to be uniquely provocative to both simultaneously. But there is nothing they need to hear more than to try to pierce the echo chambers that tell them daily that the other side is uniquely wrong and pathological, while they are uniquely right and good.

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