

## The Religious Dimensions of the Conflict in light of Trump's Middle East Visit

### London and Kirshenbaum, Channel 10, 23-5-17

*London: Another point of view regarding the visit of President Trump. Few speak of the theological-religious aspects. In this visit Trump spoke of the "Abrahamic Faiths", an expression few employ in Israel which refers to the three large monotheistic faiths - Islam, Christianity and Judaism. Ofer Zalberg is a Senior Analyst with the Middle East Program of the International Crisis Group. I don't know what this organization is.*

OZ: It is a group that has representatives in some 60 conflict arenas worldwide and provides analysis and recommendations on how to advance the transformation of conflicts – that is to transform them from violent to non-violent situations and to resolve the issues of dispute as much as possible.

*London: You think that the religious dimension is consequential. Even though we were warned about its transformation from one with a political, state-centered, territorial, business-like character to a spiritual one in which there are no compromises. You argue that compromises can be found there.*

OZ: Not exactly that compromises can always be found but that even when compromises cannot be found agreements may be found. That is to say, the thinking of previous U.S. administrations, who had less of an explicit religious discourse than the Trump administration has shown at least during this visit, indeed treated pretty much everything as prone to compromise and division. The most salient example is perhaps the Clinton Parameters and the notion that the Temple Mount can be divided – above to those, below to those; or the idea that the State of Israel will be the homeland of the Jewish people and the State of Palestine will be the homeland of the Palestinian people, when even if political boundaries are drawn it will not stop the homeland from including Hebron or Jaffa.

This essentially means that the question of sanctity should be treated differently. My children are sacred to me. It will not help if there were great incentives so that I will give you one of them or half of them. There is no such thing. Such a discourse is offensive. We have to find another way to address sanctity in the conflict and accept it that there are large publics on both sides that attribute deep sanctity to various components in the conflict.

What can be done is to involve the religious leadership in the political efforts [to resolve the conflict]. This means that rabbis, religious educators, thinkers and intellectuals would be part of the political effort and that the political effort would not be seen exclusively as a contestation over resources but also over our attitude toward those resources. Such involvement will help parallel development, meaning, if there is movement toward a political agreement in international law, how could there be parallel movement in the Jewish law, the Halacha, or the Sharia law. This does create constraints. This means that not everything decided in international law can simply work and vice versa. This is why the cooperation between religious leaders and political leaders is necessary. It is vital. It can in fact reduce opposition to political progress. It does require new and complex thinking.

*London: Are you familiar with historical precedents for this? I only know such in which the King, that is the secular ruler, forcefully pressured his clergy until they changed something of their religious codex. I never heard of religious leaders who volunteer to compromise with other religions.*

OZ: I think the ruling of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef about the sanctity of life and the way in which it allows for territorial compromise is a very significant example because in this [Jewish-Israeli] society we see a tremendous discussion about the term “sovereignty” - why the demand for sovereignty over all the Land of Israel? Does the word “sovereignty” appear in the book of Leviticus? [It doesn’t.] What does it mean “yishuv haaretz” (settling the land) and “kibusha haaretz” (conquering the land) in modern terms? Does settling the land require sovereignty or not? Of what kind? This is not a conversation one can conduct as a political leader at the Knesset or in front of a Palestinian political leader. This is an internal conversation that should be held with religious leaders. The more the religious leaders are removed from the political conversations the stricter positions they put up in order to defend that sanctity. Their partnership, their potential ensuing desire to move forward politically, allows them to show what truly has to be defended and what can be changed.

*London: In the meanwhile the religious leaders of the three Abrahamic faiths are the most extreme. If you take the Christian Evangelicals in the U.S. Or the Muslim preachers of various kinds and groups. Or the national-haredi leaders in our society. They are the ones with whom it is most difficult to create dialogue between them and the members of other religions.*

OZ: This relates also to the question of cause and effect - the chicken and the egg. Is part of their rigidity a result of being excluded and excluding themselves from the political efforts? Or is really something theological that cannot be changed.

Historically we do so theological developments. And we just saw Trump call, as you noted, for the unity of the three Abrahamic faiths and saying that if such unity will be reached then Israeli-Palestinian peace will be possible. Do we actually have today, and do we really know today, what religious backing is there for the Arab Peace Initiative? It certainly has political backing. It tries to provide backing to certain Palestinian moderation – for example in comparison to Hamas which opposes territorial compromise – but with what religious backing? Is there a religious ruling? Now when Trump calls upon Islam to renew itself and change, would then be able to back this with an Islamic initiative of some sort? And most certainly, you are correct, in the same manner we should look at processes within Jewish society.

To your question - the various muftis are noteworthy. The Grand Mufti of Egypt at the time issued a ruling and strengthened the Israel-Egypt peace agreement. This is one of many reasons for its persistence over decades.

*London: We have to end here. I thank you very much for offering us this point of view.*