THE BURDEN OF FREEDOM

MISCONCEPTIONS OF LIBERTY IN THE ARAB STREET
CASE STUDY: PALESTINE

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It is difficult to oppose a people's demand for freedom. Liberty is, after all, an inalienable right, and one espoused indefatigably by the West as the cure for all that ails. Yet in our advocacy of individual liberty, rarely does the discussion fall to just what *kind* of liberty is being sought. In an age when the world is becoming increasingly polarized between the Judeo-Christian West and the Arab-Muslim East, the need to understand the roots of this clash of civilizations is no longer a peripheral issue, but a glaring necessity.

In this essay, I will examine the clash of civilizations as a manifestation of two contradictory interpretations of freedom as presented in Dr. Isaiah Berlin's arresting lecture on the "Two Concepts of Liberty," delivered at Oxford University in 1958. Using the Occupied Palestinian Territories as a case study, I hope to demonstrate that though liberal democracy may result in the end of history, as Francis Fukuyama claimed, liberal democracy cannot flourish unless there is genuine understanding of what it is to be free, a concept seemingly misinterpreted by our Arab counterparts. I do not subscribe to the undeserving fatalism that so many pundits of our time appear to have fallen victim, but it is my belief that in order to sustain even a fragile stalemate in this age of rising tension, we must seek to understand these two concepts of liberty in hopes of finding practical resolutions we so desperately need.

POSITIVE VS. NEGATIVE LIBERTY

For those of us in the West, we generally accept what Berlin terms as "negative liberty," encompassing a kind of freedom that protects citizens from interference or intrusion by any

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person or institution without their consent. One need only to examine the Bill of Rights and other founding documents, to realize that freedoms traditionally sought have been freedoms *from* – from encroachment on the right to free speech, religion, association, or press, or from intrusion into an individual's sphere of control. In other words, the Western measure of freedom is determined by the level of noninterference. "The wider the noninterference," Berlin states, "the wider the liberty."

This is a natural byproduct of a developed society in which the population is educated, employed, and involved. For these people, it is unreasonable for them to accept that the role of government is anything more than mere protection of their rights and freedoms. The relationship between the citizens and the government is kept at bay as a result of the inherent cynicism that the population feels towards an institution that competes for control.

Conversely, in a country that desperately lacks fundamental necessities, such as education, employment opportunities, or transparent systems in which to be involved, there logically develops a need for a type of "positive" liberty. In this interpretation of liberty, the government does not exist to protect the already-recognized freedoms of the population, but to provide those freedoms, and thus support its citizens. Positive liberty dictates not what the government should refrain from doing, but the many things that the government must do in order to sustain the wellbeing of the population. Berlin, on this point, makes a convincing argument that "[f]reedom is not everyone's primary need… [for some,] clothes or medicine or education [come] before freedom." Subsequently, when freedom is measured by the government's role in providing, for example, clothes, medicine, or education, we can deduce that positive liberty would hold that the greater the interference into the lives of the people, the greater the liberty.

John Stuart Mill, in his seminal work, "On Liberty," would disagree with the concept that our Arab counterparts have adopted, claiming that "[m]en must be permitted to maintain a degree of freedom in their personal domain, otherwise civilization cannot advance; the truth will not, for lack of a free market in ideas, come to light; there will be no scope for spontaneity, originality, genius, for mental energy, for moral courage. Society will be crushed by the weight of collective

mediocrity." Thus for the masses, "collective mediocrity" becomes the standard, but what becomes the accepted role of the leadership?

When analyzing authority vis-à-vis the two concepts, again the clash of cultures is apparent. With regard to negative liberty of the West, the focus lies in the scope of authority as opposed to the actual source. Certainly the source matters, particularly when the conversation shifts from liberty to democracy, but looking solely at liberty as an "end in itself," as Lord Acton noted, our concern is the scope it commands, not the person who commands. Again, turning now to Arab-Muslim society, we find the reverse to be true. Because their brand of freedom requires a significant scope of authority (since there must be a sizeable, dominant institution in order to implement the many "freedoms" they demand), the level of interference plays an inconsequential role. It is not the scope, but the source of authority. It is with this attitude of total submission to authority that we discover a dangerous reality which breeds dictatorial regimes bent on maintaining their control by preserving the status quo, a condition that is suffocating the Arab world, and with the consent of the Muslim people.

On this note, let us now turn to the case of the Occupied Palestinian Territories to examine the manifestations of this illiberal concept of freedom.

Illiberal notions of Freedom in the Palestinian Territories

Firstly, we must assume that what the Palestinian people are seeking is, in fact, freedom. I say this with a degree of skepticism because it is my opinion that often the rallying cry for freedom is an inaccurate use of the word as a translation for justice, equality, or other social values which trump their desire for liberty in its most direct form, that is, the freedom from intrusion. In fact, one could easily recognize the mistranslation when examining many of the actions employed by Palestinian activists to achieve that "freedom." Suicide bombings, for example, represent a desire for justice, i.e. retaliatory justice for the taking of a Palestinian's life by an Israeli. It is obvious that suicide attacks will not achieve freedom, but in a culture that hinges its understanding of justice on a premodern code of Hammurabi law mandating eye for an eye justice, it is clear that justice is what is being sought; "You take my child's life, and I will take yours." Likewise, one could cite the actual Arabic word, "hurriyya," in which the direct translation equates to

"disorder," used to describe the state of disorder during "jahiliyya," the time of ignorance prior to the advent of Islam. Following this line of thought, disorder (freedom) is alleviated by imposing a system of strict justice. Moreover, in the traditional sense of justice, as the solution for the disorder of jahiliyya, justice is associated with the coming of the Prophet Muhammad, and therefore justice equals Islam. Islam becomes "the solution," or stated in other words, freedom is obedience to Islam. Again, freedom is submission.

However, in the sense that Palestinians do pursue liberty (the above commentary notwithstanding), what is sought is positive liberty. For the Palestinians, like much of the Arab world, their desire for liberty is a result of their desire for recognition. Berlin observes, "the lack of freedom about which men or groups complain amounts, as often as not, to the lack of proper recognition… [they] are not seeking equality of legal rights, nor liberty to do as [they] wish, although [they] may want these too, but a condition in which [they] can feel that… [their] will is being taken into consideration." What makes this desire for recognition such a precarious state, is that in their earnest demand to be recognized, to be in solidarity with a common cause and struggle, to be a part of a "whole," they will "prefer to be bullied and misgoverned by some member of [their] own race or social class, by whom [they are] nevertheless recognized as a man and a rival – that is, as an equal – to being well and tolerantly treated by someone from some higher and remoter group (i.e. Israel), someone who does not recognize [them] for what [they] wish to feel [themselves] to be" (Berlin).

Here I would make note of the construction of the Security Barrier within the West Bank as evidence of the above claim. Putting aside the legal implications of the Wall's construction, let us briefly consider the psychological effect and the ostensible inconsistency of the Palestinian argument against the Wall. If, in fact, what the Palestinians are demanding is freedom and sovereignty from the nation of Israel, should a physical barrier between these two territories compromise the sovereignty of either country? The logical answer is no. A wall that may be perceived as a structure to enclose the Palestinians could equally be perceived as a structure built around Palestine to keep Israelis out. If Palestinians wanted freedom in the classical sense of noninterference (negative liberty), the erection of a barrier to begin to establish a framework in which to create a democratic nation, should be a welcomed initiative. However, if the

Palestinians are resentful because they feel that it denies them recognition by instead "relegating" them into a kind of modern-day Pale, then the theory that Palestine has confused the understanding of liberty, is a substantiated claim.

When the Palestinians do achieve their desired end – recognition by one of their own – they will equate this triumph to a success of personal liberty. For Palestine, this transition from control by "them" to control by "us," would, of course, take place when Israeli occupying forces withdraw. So what will happen when they attain their sovereignty? As precedent would suggest, following the lead of most Arab nations that have successfully overthrown pro-Western governments (a government that is not "one of there own") (i.e. Iran, Afghanistan, etc.), the Palestinians will find their freedom (if, as stated above, we accept that their view of freedom equates to submission), in total obedience to a dictatorial leader from their own ethnic and religious group. Ironically, this will likely occur through an exercise of democracy. In fact, I would note that Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, certainly not above reproach for his propagation of fundamentalist Islam and violent resistance, is the most democratically elected leader in the Arab world. It is true, then, as Mill observed, that "democracy, government by the people, is not necessarily freedom at all." Berlin adds, "If I consent to being oppressed… am I less oppressed?... Consent to the loss of liberty does not make the loss of liberty any less pronounced. The triumph of despotism is to force the slaves to declare themselves free… the slaves may proclaim their freedom quite sincerely, but they are nonetheless slaves." Niccolo Machiavelli was an outspoken proponent for this coercion (employed in Arab nations and by Yasser Arafat in Ramallah), advocating the logic of coercing a subject into believing that the ends that a leader seeks to achieve are consistent with his subjects' desires. Returning to that *sine qua non* aim of being a part of a "whole," this perceived common goal makes the citizens feel as though they have achieved that camaraderie. Let us not forget, however, that this is the very antithesis of liberty – personal or political. Therefore, what can be observed is that simply because the Arab people, Palestinians in this case, may yield their liberty or may believe they are the recipients of great benevolence by their leaders, they remain under the yoke of oppression. This type of control can be compared to a kind of cunning, distorted paternalism that, while protecting citizens and providing stability, does so to such an extreme that it essentially suffocates them, defending Kant's declaration that "Paternalism is the greatest form of despotism."

The loss of liberty at the hands of a dictatorial leader remains the status quo in most Arab nations, including Palestine and all twenty-two members of the Arab League. And though this loss may be compensated for by a gain in some other value, such as equality or stability or justice (and in the case of the Arab Street, justice and equality appear to have entirely replaced liberty), the loss still remains. It is this loss in personal liberty that has resulted in that state of "collective mediocrity" (and arguably collective frustration or, worse, resignation) that Mill refers to.

A CONFLICT OF IDEAS

Before transitioning the analysis to reasons why and solutions for such illiberality in the East, I would like to review and pull together several points already addressed which support my theory that the clash of civilizations can be equated with two incongruent conceptions of liberty. The first, a Western attitude of negative liberty, is a sense of liberty that relates to the level of control over personal space, i.e. freedom from intrusion or interference. Its concern focuses primarily on restricting the scope of liberty in order to allow for the full recognition of human potential. Those who promote this approach – Mill, Benjamin Constant, John Locke, Tocqueville – all recognize that "there must be a minimum area of personal freedom which must on no account be violated… [and] a line must be drawn between the area of private life and that of public authority," without which freedom ceases to exist.

On the other hand, what our Arab counterparts in the East have accepted is positive liberty. Immanuel Kant, an advocate of this approach, suggests that this kind of freedom is achieved when "the individual has entirely abandoned his wild, lawless freedom, to find it again, unimpaired, in a state of dependence according to law," i.e. total and unyielding justice. Positive liberty denies the individual a personal domain, which results in a lack of personal achievement, and a "collective mediocrity" of the state. So long as your existence is validated by one of your own and your minimum needs are satisfied, the level of interference or oppression is unimportant.

Two natural questions emerge once we acknowledge that this clash exists. First, why have Arabs accepted the latter approach? Second, how can the differences be reconciled?

For the first question as to why Muslim Arabs have adopted such inaccurate conceptions of liberty, I would argue that the lack of liberal education has essentially closed the marketplace of ideas. This does not suggest that the Arab people, particularly the Palestinians, are uneducated (the literacy rate is 92%), but that they are not liberally educated. In the Occupied Palestinian Territories, liberal education simply does not exist. Rather, it is vocational training – which still may include subjects as broad-ranging as mathematics, science, language, etc – that Palestinian students receive, from primary school to university. There are a number of explanations for the vocational focus, which include both Islamic-based justifications as well as practical excuses for the void in liberal education. (Note: Because I have chosen not to discuss the precepts of Islam, per se, in this paper, my commentary will not encompass that debate. However, Islam has certainly played a significant role in defining the educational system and its influence cannot be overstated.)

As pertains the practical reasons for the lack of education, in a nation that has succumbed to a "collective mediocrity" (and though Palestine remains my primary focus, most Arab states fall into this description, as well), economic growth rates have either leveled off or are on the decline. Notwithstanding the economic damage resulting from the Intifada and military occupation, the reality is that the economic growth rates in Palestine and the Arab Street have been wanting in contrast to the economic booms of the West. This stagnation has caused a need for students to seek training in fields that may increase their income-earning capability. For students not pursuing higher education, they will likely inherit a family-owned workshop or pursue a trade that does not require a formal education, thereby eliminating their academic pursuits altogether. On the other hand, for those seeking to enter the workplace in business, science, etc., these students will enroll in a focused program that teaches only the basic skills needed to be successful, such as language, science, finance, etc. In an educational system that prides itself on mass turnover of students into the workforce, a process that must be expedited because of the need for men and women to take on roles in the home at a much younger age and

subsequently cannot afford to spend the necessary time in the classroom, the legacy of lifelong learning and intellectual inquiry is lacking in the Arab Street.

In the primary and secondary educational systems, the focus exclusively on necessary, vocational subjects is all the more evident. As proof of this assertion, I present the following points. Islam (and only Islam) is required of all students from the first year of schooling, and religious study outside of the Quo'ran is not available in the public school system. World history is confined to Arabia, and begins in 570 AD, the birth year of the Prophet Muhammad (interestingly, therefore, omitting the study of the foundations of democracy and liberty in ancient Greece and Rome). Philosophical questioning is not encouraged, nor accessible, because the subjects do not exist as an optional course for students. The list goes on and on. These conditions cannot be ignored when examining why the Palestinian people are unable accept liberty in its negative form. With such a limited education and attention on one set of rigid "truths," young people are not taught to use the fullness of their minds. After all, in a society where stability is so highly guarded, encouraging individuals to think for themselves through pursuing philosophy or liberal arts, is perceived to be potentially destabilizing by causing tradition to come into question. As one could expect, this destabilization presents a threat to the leadership. It is no wonder, then, that the society has descended into a state of mediocrity, frustration, and a resurgence of Islam has emerged as a means to find an identity and a justification for dissatisfaction and restlessness. Why, then, have the Palestinians refused to acknowledge freedom in its negative form? Predominately, though a number of factors are accountable, lack of education tops the list.

To address the second question, how can we reconcile the differences, it is necessary first to acknowledge that some minimum standard of freedom must be respected. Constant, Mill, and Tocqueville all agreed that "[no] society is free unless it is governed by… two interrelated principles: first, that no power, only rights, can be regarded as absolute, so that all men, whatever power governs them, have an absolute right to refuse to behave inhumanely; and, second, that there are frontiers not artificially drawn, within which men should be inviolable" (Berlin). And though one may assert a single, absolute concept of liberty as the "right" notion of freedom, to attempt to transplant their notion into another society is unreasonable. Those inviolable frontiers for which all men are entitled, must be preserved, whether or not a man or society voluntarily

relinquishes their minimum freedoms. When this frontier is trespassed, it is the responsibility of all to act on the behalf of those who cannot act on their own accord. Having said that, we also cannot confuse lack of freedom with lack of justice or fairness or recognition, or for lack of ability to achieve a desired aim. Berlin reminds us that "[m]ere incapacity to achieve a goal is not a lack of liberty… Liberty is liberty – not equality, or fairness, or justice, or culture, or human happiness, or a quiet conscience."

Recognizing that many of the freedoms "voluntarily" relinquished in the Arab world, are nevertheless a violation of the rights of those individuals because they are coerced into doing so, there exists a moral obligation for the outside world to act on behalf of the Arab populations who are unable to act and are unaware of their conditions. In what manner that is achieved is a worthwhile and timely debate.

From the perspective of a young woman who has lived and worked with Arabs and Palestinians for a number of years in the fields of education and humanitarian aid, it is my belief that when considering the current Intifada in the Palestinian Territories, and the broader clash between Arabs and the West, we must first understand that the conflict is not simply relative to issues of land or of "technical" discrepancies. Resolving the physical barriers will do little, if nothing, to resolve the psychological barriers for the Muslim population in Palestine to be truly free. It is not the fault of Israel that the Palestinian population is psychologically oppressed, though I stand in defense of the right for a people, including the Palestinians, to pursue the path of self-determination, and I believe there must be a just resolution for the conflict, which includes an end to the Occupation. However, in order for the Palestinians to embrace that self-determination and liberty, the people must genuinely understand what it is to be free. When the clash is founded on intellectual misunderstanding (as it currently is), our primary engagement should be through humanitarian aid and education – in refugee camps, in hospitals, schools, private clinics and workshops – there are practical ways in which to promote the appreciation of liberty in its most classic interpretation (negative liberty). Do not misunderstand me, however, by assuming that I am advocating a campaign to "convert" the Muslim or Arab populations to a single, Western way of thinking. Rather, I am of the strong conviction that we must encourage and

foster an environment where they are able to freely choose their destiny, free from interference and coercion, and where they can exercise their full potential.

Obviously to suggest that there is one explicit or easy solution (such as education) that can be applied to a problem that is rooted in the deepest values of a culture, cultures that have developed and subscribe to two entirely incongruent interpretations of what it means to be free, would be a presumptuous and naïve claim. In this clash of civilizations, we must continue to accept that while the clash often appears deceptively political or "technical" in nature and could be solved by addressing those political disagreements, conflicts between people and cultures are more often than not reducible to conflicts of ideas. I am reminded of the German poet, Heine, when he warned us to "[n]ever underestimate the power of ideas: philosophical concepts nurtured in the stillness of a professor's study could destroy a civilization." Knowing that, it becomes incumbent upon us to engage our "adversaries" on a debate of ideology (not a US-led show of military might). "In the end, men choose between ultimate values; they choose as they do because their life and thought are determined by fundamental moral categories and concepts that are… a part of their being and thought and sense of their own identity; part of what makes them human" (Berlin).