

Breaking Taboos In the Search For Truth

Arun Gandhi's Pursuit of Peace

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The fact that the fifth grandson of legendary peace activist Mahatma Gandhi, should be forced to resign as head of his own peace institute in the United States, after critical remarks he had made about Israeli policy, should set alarm bells ringing — not one, but two sets of bells. On the one hand, his forced resignation seemed to confirm the fear that anyone in the United States who dared criticize Israeli policy as aggressive, would be dubbed a “bigot” or “anti-semitic,” and forced to withdraw from public life. On the other hand, however, a different alarm has been sounded, one that warns that such blanket condemnation of any criticism of Israeli policy, will boomerang, and force an open, honest, no-holds-barred debate on a crucial political and moral issue. So, from this standpoint, I say, let the alarm bells ring.

The ostensible issue, noted en passant by the establishment press at the end of January, was the following: Dr. Arun Gandhi, president and co-founder of the M.K. Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence, had participated in a January 7 online essay published on the washingtonpost.com’s On Faith site, on the theme of “Jewish identity.” Gandhi’s remarks, as quoted in wire services internationally, included the following: “Jewish identity in the past has been locked into the Holocaust experience.... It is a very good example of [how] a community can overplay a historic experience to the point that it begins to repulse friends.... The world did feel sorry for the episode but when an individual or a nation refuses to forgive and move on the regret turns into anger The Jewish identity in the future appears bleak.... We have created a culture of violence (Israeli and the Jews are the biggest players) and that Culture of Violence is eventually going to destroy humanity”

(www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/02/01/AR2008020102506_pf...).

No sooner had the discussion appeared on the washingtonpost.com home page, than all hell broke loose. The national chairman of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) Abraham H. Foxman stated, “It’s shameful that a peace institute would be headed up by a bigot” adding that “One would hope that the grandson of such an illustrious human being would be more sensitive to Jewish history.” Gandhi issued an apology, clarifying that, although he stood behind his criticisms of violence exercised by the Israeli government, –as well as by the U.S., Indian and Chinese governments–, he did “not believe and should not have implied that the policies of the Israeli government are reflective of the views of all Jewish people.” He went on to acknowledge the “suffering of the Jewish people, particularly in the Holocaust” as “historic in its proportions,” called for “a future of peace that rejects violence,” and added the important thought: “Having learned from the [past], we can then find the path to peace and rejection of violence through forgiveness.”

The Politics of Peace

The uproar created over the internet exchange has raised the issue, at least among peace-seeking individuals, of how in fact the culture of violence — wherever it may raise its ugly head — can be overcome by a culture of peace and understanding. The deeper implications of the Gandhi affair are therefore important, and need to be addressed from a higher standpoint than the name-calling and political blackmailing that the ADL et al have engaged in thus far.

If one is serious about establishing peace in the world, one should examine past human history, to identify when and how peace efforts have actually been successful. One such historical precedent is the 1648 Peace of Westphalia. The Thirty Years War (1618-1648) was one of the bloodiest wars that the world had seen up to that time. That conflict pitted Protestants against Catholics in most of the major European countries at the time, including Denmark, Germany, Sweden, Bohemia, France and the Hapsburg Empire. After the war, 40% to 66% of the populations and wealth were destroyed. The German population had been reduced from 21 million to 13 million in the war. Famine, disease, plundering armies and their followers, laid waste to Europe.

Not only the physical destruction, but the moral devastation was immense. Since this had been a religious conflict, between the forces of the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation, anyone and everyone was targeted purely on the basis of religion. Thus, the hatred generated through the war was deep-rooted and all-pervasive.

The only way that peace could be achieved, was through a radically new concept of relations among peoples and nations. It was due to the genius of France's Cardinal Jules Mazarin that such a new, higher concept was developed and introduced into negotiations among the warring parties during the years 1642 and 1648. The fundamental breakthrough in conception was the idea that peace could come only if each side acknowledged the wrongdoings and forgave the other; and, that each side sought the benefit of the other.

In the Treaty, this is most explicit. Article I begins: "A Christian general and permanent peace, and true and honest friendship, must rule between the Holy Imperial Majesty and the Holy All-Christian Majesty, as well as between all and every ally and follower of the mentioned Imperial Majesty, the House of Austria ... and successors And this Peace must be so honest and seriously guarded and nourished that each part furthers the advantage, honor, and benefit of the other.... A faithful neighborliness should be renewed and flourish for peace and friendship, and flourish again."

This means that, for peace to succeed, each nation must develop itself fully, but at the same time, contribute to the full development of each other nation, as in its own perceived self-interest.

Article II of the Treaty deals with the subjective side of the peace: "On both sides, all should be forever forgotten and forgiven—what has from the beginning of the unrest, no matter how or where, from one side or the other, happened in terms of hostility—so that neither because of that, nor for any other reason or pretext, should anyone commit, or allow to happen, any hostility, unfriendliness, difficulty, or obstacle in respect to persons, their status, goods, or security itself, or through others, secretly or openly, directly or indirectly, under the pretense of the authority of the law, or by way of violence within the Kingdom, or anywhere outside of it, and any earlier contradictory treaties should not stand against this.

“Instead, [the fact that] each and every one, from one side and the other, both before and during the war, committed insults, violent acts, hostilities, damages, and injuries, without regard of persons or outcomes, should be completely put aside, so that everything whatever one could demand from another under his name, will be forgotten to eternity.”

The Treaty of Westphalia established for the first time the concept of the nation-state as an independent and totally sovereign entity. In addition, Mazarin emphasized that peace could prevail only if all the formerly adversary parties joined in a common effort to promote economic and trade activities that would benefit all sides. His concept was a predecessor to the concept introduced by Pope Paul VI, in his 1967 encyclical, *Populorum progressio* (on The Progress of Peoples) in which he called for establishing peace through economic development and cooperation.

Gandhi's Pursuit of Peace

When one reads the {full text} of Arun Gandhi's statements, against the backdrop of this brief summary of the Peace of Westphalia, one should be struck by the fact that he was indeed echoing these noble ideas. In his much-misrepresented remarks of January 7, Arun Gandhi had actually said the following:

“Jewish identity in the past has been locked into the Holocaust experience — a German burden that the Jews have not yet been able to shed. It is a very good example of [how] a community can overplay a historic experience to the point that it begins to repulse friends. The holocaust was the result of the warped mind of an individual who was able to influence his followers into doing something dreadful. But it seems to me the Jews today not only want the Germans to feel guilt but the whole world must regret what happened to the Jews. The world did feel sorry for the episode but when an individual or a nation refuses to forgive and move on the regret turns into anger.”

He went on: “The Jewish identity in the future appears bleak. Any nation that remains anchored to the past is unable to move ahead and, especially a nation that believes its survival can only be ensured by weapons and bombs. In Tel Aviv in 2004 I had the opportunity to speak to some members of Parliament and Peace activists all of whom argued that the wall and the military build-up was necessary to protect the nation and the people. In other words, I asked, you believe that you can create a snake pit — with many deadly snakes in it — and expect to live in the pit secure and alive? What do you mean? they countered. Well, with your superior weapons and armaments and your attitude towards your neighbors would it not be right to say that you are creating a snake pit? How can anyone live peacefully in such an atmosphere? Would it not be better to befriend those who hate you? Can you not reach out and share your technological advancement with your neighbors and build a relationship?

“Apparently, in the modern world, so determined to live by the bomb, this is an alien concept. You don't befriend anyone, you dominate them. We have created a culture of violence (Israel and the Jews are the biggest players) and that Culture of Violence is eventually going to destroy humanity.”

(http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/arun_gandhi/2008/01/jewish_identity_in_the_)

It can not be denied that Mr. Gandhi made a serious error in attributing the culture of violence to “the Jews,” who, as a community in the United States, or any European country

or even Israel, are anything but a monolithic phenomenon, differentiated politically in a wide variety of standpoints and views. Arun Gandhi in fact specified this in his official apology, as noted above, adding that “many are as concerned as I am by the use of violence for state purposes, by Israeli and many other governments.” (http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/arun_gandhi/2008/01/my_apology_for_my_p..) He later reported he had received several statements of solidarity from Jewish friends and organizations who defended his stance.

That said, one should focus on the content of his remarks. Two main points Gandhi is making are those which echo the Westphalian peace approach: “Would it not be better to befriend those who hate you?” he asks. And his emphasis on forgiveness: Gandhi had said that “when an individual or a nation refuses to forgive and move on, the regret turns into anger.” In his apology, he stressed the importance of rejecting violence “through forgiveness,” again an echo of Westphalia. The same idea is expressed in his bid for Israel to share the wealth of its technological achievements with its neighbors and former adversaries, to join in collaborative economic efforts, in pursuit of “the benefit of the other.”

Breaking Taboos

Although it is regrettable that Arun Gandhi has been forced through raw political pressure to give up his post at his M.K. Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence, perhaps his sacrifice may contribute to achievement of a greater good, and that is, that the entire issue may be finally subjected to open, rational public debate. This was the thrust of a discussion held on the new English-language Iranian TV station and website www.presstv.ir, on its “Fine Print” show on February 4. The debate, which this author took part in, noted the fact that Arun Gandhi’s criticisms of the policy of certain Israeli factions, was not academic or abstract, but the result of his experiences as a young man in apartheid South Africa. As an Indian, he was subjected to discrimination both by whites and blacks, and tended to respond with rage. He was therefore sent to India to learn from his grandfather Mahatma Gandhi, how to control his emotions, through the philosophy of non-violence. In an essay (www.scu.edu/ethics/architects-of-peace/Gandhi/essay.html), Gandhi characterized his grandfather’s philosophy as neither “passive resistance” nor “civil disobedience,” but rather “satyagraha,” a Sanskrit expression meaning “the pursuit of truth.”

Arun Gandhi criticized Israeli policy towards the Palestinians as similar to South Africa’s apartheid, a point later made by former President Jimmy Carter in his 2006 book, “Palestine Peace Not Apartheid.” Biographical accounts report that Gandhi proposed to the Palestinian parliament in 2004, during a visit, that they organize a non-violent march to oppose Israel’s occupation policy. This author noted that Arun Gandhi’s actual message was revolutionary, in its echoing the Peace of Westphalia, a precedent that should serve for those seeking peace between Palestine and Israel. Tehran Times journalist Hamid Golpira made the point in the TV debate, that those who pursue the culture of hatred and dehumanize the other, end up also dehumanizing themselves; just as the bombs on Nagasaki and Hiroshima had robbed America of its soul, he argued, so continuing Israeli oppression of the Palestinians will take its moral toll on the population. In fact, a U.S. based editor noted, about a million Israelis have reportedly left the country, because they will not condone this policy.

Those speaking from the U.S. to PressTV, said they both saw an overall phase-change in public and political attitudes on the issue of Israel, and its influence on U.S. politics. One clear signal to this effect is the appearance of the book “The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy,” by John J. Mearsheimer and Stephan M. Walt, which unleashed a massive debate

both in the British and American press. Other books on the same or similar themes, have appeared, contributing to breaking open the bell jar that had earlier suffocated any open debate on the relationship between the policies of certain extremist Israeli political figures, and their U.S. counterparts. The fact that two former officials of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) are being tried for passing classified Pentagon documents to Israeli Embassy personnel, is also indicative of the new mood.

In this, an election year, such an open debate on the role and influence of the Zionist lobby on U.S. foreign policy, can only be welcomed with open arms. One should not forget that, despite the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) report of December 3, stating Iran had no nuclear weapons program, plans are still on the drawing boards for an Israeli and/or U.S. attack on the Islamic Republic. In this context, Mr. Gandhi's observations and concerns are of utmost relevance.

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