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Reflections on Terrorism, Dialogue and Global Ethics¹

by M. Javad Zarif

The tragic events of 11 September 2001 highlighted in the most vivid yet inhuman form the scope and magnitude of our common vulnerability; the vulnerability of each and every one of us to the barbarism and inhumanity of a perverted response to injustice and exclusion. They also indicated how the new and non-traditional actors can have a significant, and at times destructive and tragic, role in shaping international relations. But most importantly, they brought to focus the need to address the very mentality and modes of global interaction that lie at the root of terror and violence.

Under these tragic circumstances, empathy is the only human response. We cannot, but share in the pain and anguish of thousands of families who lost their loved ones and an entire nation that has been traumatized by the horror of this crime. Emotions and anger are only human, but we need a great deal of collective reflection and wisdom to establish a rational and far-sighted response. This response should focus not only on this horrific crime, but on terrorism in general. More importantly, it must deal with the roots of injustice and exclusion that can be exploited by demagogues to inflict so much harm on innocent human beings.

Any response requires vision, serious political will and the active participation and cooperation of all. As a global menace, terrorism needs a global response, founded on inclusion, fairness and international legitimacy.

As a tragedy caused by blind hatred, the response cannot be indiscriminate retribution, which would put many innocent lives at risk. Terrorists should not be allowed to set the agenda, or dictate the response.

Terrorism is a heinous product of an outdated paradigm of international relations. That paradigm was founded on the “will to power” and the arrogance associated with it. In other words, it was founded on the proposition that “might makes right”. As “might” ruled, injustice prevailed and hatred flourished; those dispossessed were inclined to resort to terror and violence. We must eradicate terrorism by changing the prevalent mentality that provided a fertile ground for the growth of this menace. Every one who is serious about fighting terrorism, especially those in a position of global power, would be well advised not to resort to statements and policies ema-

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nating from emotions intertwined with the arrogance of power that could only further entrench the mentality that produced terrorism.

An important characteristic of that outdated paradigm of global interactions was exclusion in its various forms. It divided the world in terms of modes of loyalty into “coalition members” and “enemies”, and as such rewards and punishments were distributed accordingly. The need for an everpresent enemy is so important for governance that at times enemies are forged as a managerial tool. This approach to global politics has brought bloodshed and devastation to human society, suppressed much potential, wasted much precious human capabilities and scarce natural resources, and instead, gave rise to domination, violence and underdevelopment.

Globalization can contribute positively to the comprehensive and sustainable development of the developing world, and in some cases it has. But the tendencies that are prevalent in the dominant paradigm of exclusion can lead the same phenomenon—as they have on many occasions—to further marginalization of the underdeveloped economies, exacerbation of poverty and hunger in vast parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America and the further widening of the gap between the rich and the poor in other parts of the world.

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The international community has been moving away from that paradigm to a new paradigm founded on equal footing, stakeholding and dispersion of power. The purposes and principles of the United Nations and the decision of the General Assembly to designate 2001 as the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations reflects the will of the international community to move forward to this new paradigm. According to the book entitled *Crossing the Divide*, prepared by the Group of Eminent Persons appointed by the UN Secretary-General to define the parameters of the new paradigm:

The fight against HIV/AIDS; the regulation of new technologies such as human cloning, genetic transformation and bioengineering; copyrights on intellectual property; anti-narcotic rules; disease control; and control of interference in the computing systems of institutions, countries, parties and organizations are only some of the dimensions that require for their success the full cooperation of all members of international society. Accordingly, even the smallest needs to be brought in, and even the smallest may have an important contribution to make. In the fight against contagious disease, the coalition against it is only as strong as its weakest member... It is this equality in vulnerability that stimulates dialogue. Equality in vulnerability is also the direct consequence of interdependence in many, many levels. It is this interdependence that has transformed “the threat” into “global threat”²

This new paradigm is emerging because, there is a greater realization that, what

unites us is by far greater than the differences which divides us. Moreover, this realization is stronger and probably more vivid today than before September 11th, because it heightened our appreciation of our common vulnerability to threats ranging from terrorism and organized crime to poverty and environmental degradation. In the era of globalization, there can be no island of security, prosperity and development. Thus our common humanity and common vulnerabilities are emerging as better tools for global governance than the perceived or imaginary enemies.

The processes of globalization are giving birth to a new paradigm of global relations: equal footing; re-assessment of the “enemy”; dispersion of power; stakeholding; individual responsibility; and issue-driven alignments. The current reality is a mosaic of the old and the new. The elements of the new paradigm are already there, but to a certain extent we are blinded by the old paradigm, which prevents us from seeing what is emerging.³

The new paradigm begins with the assumption that the sources of knowledge and wisdom are inherently diversified. Each civilization has much to offer; and that inclusion will bring with it mutual enrichment and benefit. Thus, the emerging paradigm of Dialogue among Civilizations is founded on “inclusion, and a collective desire to learn, uncover and examine assumptions, unfold shared meaning and core values, and integrate multiple perspectives through dialogue.”⁴

Dialogue in this sense represents a fundamental change from debate. Through debate, a consistent method of communication at the United Nations, each side tries to convince the other of its view; many times, without ever listening to the arguments. However, we start a dialogue with a readiness and in fact a desire not only to listen but to be persuaded. The decision of the actors of the international community to replace wars and bloodshed with debate was indeed a major positive evolution of historical proportions. Yet debate is in essence an attempt, as in war, to overcome the adversary, albeit through a more civilized means. A paradigm shift would require a revolutionary change from debate to dialogue. According to the Group of Eminent Persons:

Dialogue brings with it equal footing...as it is a process by which we accept, as much as we want to be accepted. We include, as much as we want to be included. We listen, as much as we want to be listened to...In these terms, dialogue can perhaps eventually usher in a new paradigm of global relations because it challenges the old paradigm... Dialogue can be a framework where the weakest is accorded the privilege to be listened to, and where the strongest finds it necessary to explain its case to others.⁵

To accord the weakest the privilege to be listened to, coupled with the readiness to be persuaded will indeed prove to be mutually enriching. It will allow the global community to draw upon the vast resources of all civilizations and through integration of multiple perspectives derive a set of common values which can be embraced by all and developed into a global ethic. For instance, while values such as “liberty, rights and personal dignity” have received universal recognition and reverence, the contri-

bution of countries of the East and the South have brought into focus corresponding values such as “duty, human responsibility and the good of the community”. These values can guide the development of a fuller agenda to address social disintegration, environmental degradation and poverty.

Moreover, while “liberty, rationality, legality and rights” have received considerable attention in contemporary political discourse, we may be able, through dialogue, to integrate “liberty with justice”, “rationality with sympathy”, “legality with civility”, and finally “rights with responsibility.”

Another impact of globalization and the information revolution in our increasingly shrinking world is that they have empowered each and every one of us to directly or indirectly affect the quality of life of the rest of the world. Our potential individual impact transcends space and even time. Obviously, the extent and scope of our individual impact varies significantly. Nevertheless, this is a tremendous power that each individual has. It calls for collective reflection on a set of shared global values and ethics to discern the individual responsibility and global accountability that must accompany such unprecedented power. According to the Group of Eminent Persons in *Crossing the Divide*:

Those who hold dear to their hearts and minds the ecosystem of the earth, which is one; those who hold dear the objectives of the free market, which they believe is one; and those who hold dear the dignity and human rights of their fellow human beings irrespective of their latitude or longitude on this planet, have something in common. They all believe consciously or unconsciously that we are part of the whole, of the world community which is interconnected and whose parts mutually affect each other. The greens, the global financiers, and the human rights advocates perhaps unknowingly share a common vision: that the world is one for all, and we are all component parts of that entirety. In other words, each assumes that they have a stake in the world.⁶

We will realize that as stakeholders, humankind has a common destiny from which there is no escaping. With stakeholding, the idea of “us” versus “them” will begin to lose utility and a zero sum game will no longer be applicable as the predominant mode of rational and objective analysis. Most situations ranging from environment, global economy, trade and transfer of knowledge and technology to eradication of terrorism, organized crime and weapons of mass destruction can be analyzed as “positive sum” or “negative sum” situations. We can actually make them “positive sum” or “negative sum.” If we approach the realities of the era of globalization with a “zero sum mentality” which is remnant of the old paradigm, we would all lose and end up with “negative sum” situations.

Environmental degradation, instability, drugs, terrorism and chemical or biological weapons recognize no boundaries. This must have become abundantly clear to all of us at least after September 11th. Thus, we need to shift to a paradigm and a mindset based on dialogue and stakeholding, which allows us to appreciate this clear reality of being all parts of one unit. The renowned Iranian poet, Sa’adi, eloquently

articulated the fundamental underpinning of such a mentality 700 years ago:

*The descendents of Adam are limbs of each other,
Having been created of one essence.
When the calamity of time afflicts one limb
The other limbs cannot remain at rest.
If you have no sympathy for the troubles of others
You are unworthy to be called human.*

Notes:

¹ This article is based on two speeches by the author. The first was delivered at the United Nations General Assembly on October 2, 2001 in the course of its consideration of “measures to Eliminate International Terrorism” and the second was the keynote address by the author at UNCTAD in Geneva on 11 October 2001 on the occasion of the Centennial of Raul Prebisch.

² Dialogue among Civilizations, *Crossing the Divide* (South Orange, NJ:School of Diplomacy and International Relations, 2001),p.115

³ Ibid.,p.109.

⁴ Article 1, “Global Agenda on Dialogue among Civilizations” adopted by the UN General Assembly on November 9, 2001

⁵ Dialogue among Civilizations, pp.110-111.

⁶ Dialogue among Civilizations, p.135.