

## The Age of Middle East Atonement

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Therapeutic efforts to disguise the truth never really work.

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President Obama made an earnest effort — as is his way in matters of discord — to split the difference with the Islamic world. His speech essentially amounted to: “We did that, you did this, tit-for-tat, now we’re even, and can’t we all just get along?” He should be congratulated for expressing a desire for peace and for gently reminding the Muslim world of the way to reform, even if he did so while inflating Western sins.

But the problem with such moral equivalence is that it equates things that are, well, not equal — and therefore ends up not being moral at all.

To pull it off, one must distort both the past and the present for the presumed higher good of getting along. In the 1930s, British intellectuals performed feats of intellectual gymnastics in trying to contextualize Hitler’s complaints against the Versailles Treaty, assignment of guilt for the First World War, and French bellicosity — straining to overlook the intrinsic dangers of National Socialism for the higher good of avoiding another Somme. Over the short term, such revisionism worked; over the longer term, it ensured a highly destructive war.

Whatever a well-meaning President Obama thinks, occasional American outbursts against Muslims are not analogous with the terrorism directed at Westerners or the hostility toward Christianity shown in most of the Muslim world. Try flying into Saudi Arabia with a Bible, as compared to traveling to San Francisco with a Koran. One can easily forsake Christianity; one can never safely leave Islam. European worries about headscarves are not the equivalent of the Gulf states’ harassment of practicing Christians. Sorry, they’re just not.

Pace Obama, Arab learning in the Middle Ages, while impressive, did not really fuel either the Renaissance or the Enlightenment. If anything, the arrival in Europe of the learned of Byzantium fleeing Islam over two centuries was a far stronger catalyst for rediscovery of classical values, while enlightened European sympathy for Balkan peoples enslaved by the Ottomans rekindled romantic interest in Hellenism in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Colonialism and the Cold War — both of which have now been over for decades — do not account for present Arab pathologies. The far more pernicious Baathism, Nasserism, Pan-Arabism, and Islamism were all efforts, in varying degrees, to graft ideas of European socialism and Communism onto indigenous Arab and Muslim roots.

Today, Russia and China are much harder on Muslims than is the West. (Consider Russia's actions in Chechnya and China's treatment of the Uighurs.) Neither country pays any attention to Muslims' grievances, and therefore Muslims respect and fear Russia and China far more than they do the United States.

There are no Arab coffeehouse discussions today about the nearly 1 million Muslims killed over two decades by the Soviets in Afghanistan and the Russian government in Chechnya, yet there is constant haranguing over Abu Ghraib, where not a single inmate was killed by rogue American guards. In short, neither logic nor morality is in abundance on the Arab Street, and conjuring up American felonies will not change that.

"On the one hand, on the other hand" — what Greek rhetoricians knew as *men/de* — when delivered in mellifluous tones, can suggest a path to reconciliation. But denial of fundamental differences leads nowhere. Our problems with the Middle East will dissipate, as have to varying degrees our problems with Japan, Southeast Asia, South Korea, and South America, when the region adopts, in part or in toto, open markets, consensual government, and human rights. Until then, we are in an uneasy and dangerous waiting period.

Conflating Western misdemeanors with Middle Eastern felonies is classical conflict-resolution theory, and laudably magnanimous. But privately the world knows that Muslims are treated better in the West than Christians are in Muslim countries. That Muslims migrate to the lands of Westerners, and not vice versa. That disputes over a border between Palestinians and Israelis do not explain the unhappiness of the Arab masses, suffering from state-caused poverty and wretchedness. That American military assistance to Afghanistan, Bosnia, Kosovo, Kuwait, and Somalia, direct aid to Egypt, Jordan, and the Palestinians, and moral condemnation of Chinese, Russian, and Balkan treatment of Muslims, coupled with a generous U.S. immigration policy, are not really cause for apology or atonement.

In short, few Arab leaders wish to give a "speech to the West." They would have to take responsibility, directly or indirectly, for either fostering or appeasing radical Islam, while denying their culpability for its decades of mass murdering. They would also have to lament the global economic havoc caused in part by oil cartels and energy price-fixing.

President Obama's intent is noble, but therapeutic efforts to disguise the truth never really work. We will see how the short-term good created by his therapeutic speechmaking compares to the long-term harm caused by telling the Muslim world, once again, that its problems were largely created by us — and, therefore, that we are largely responsible for providing the remedies.

Neither is true.

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