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The Mother of all Pretexts

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WHEN I hear mention of the "Clash of Civilizations" I don't know whether to laugh or to cry.

To laugh, because it is such a silly notion.

To cry, because it is liable to cause untold disasters.

To cry even more, because our leaders are exploiting this slogan as a pretext for sabotaging any possibility of an Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation. It is just one more in a long line of pretexts.

WHY WAS the Zionist movement in need of excuses to justify the way it treated the Palestinian people?

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At its birth, it was an idealistic movement. It laid great weight on its moral basis. Not just in order to convince the world, but above all in order to set its own conscience at rest.

From early childhood we learned about the pioneers, many of them sons and daughters of well-to-do and well-educated families, who left behind a comfortable life in Europe in order to start a new life in a far-away and - by the standards of the time - primitive country. Here, in a savage climate they were not used to, often hungry and sick, they performed bone-breaking physical labor under a brutal sun.

For that, they needed an absolute belief in the rightness of their cause. Not only did they believe in the need to save the Jews of Europe >from persecution and pogroms, but also in the creation of a society so just as never seen before, an egalitarian society that would be a model for the entire world. Leo Tolstoy was no less important for them than Theodor Herzl. The kibbutz and the moshav were symbols of the whole enterprise.

But this idealistic movement aimed at settling in a country inhabited by another people. How to bridge this contradiction between its sublime ideals and the fact that their realization necessitated the expulsion of the people of the land?

The easiest way was to repress the problem altogether, ignoring its very existence: the land, we told ourselves, was empty, there was no people living here at all. That was the justification that served as a bridge over the moral abyss.

Only one of the Founding Fathers of the Zionist movement was courageous enough to call a spade a spade. Ze'ev Jabotinsky wrote as early as 80 years ago that it was impossible to deceive the Palestinian people (whose existence he recognized) and to buy their consent to the Zionist aspirations. We are white settlers colonizing the land of the native people, he said, and there is no chance whatsoever that the natives will resign themselves to this voluntarily. They will resist violently, like all the native peoples in the European colonies. Therefore we need an "Iron Wall" to protect the Zionist enterprise.

When Jabotinsky was told that his approach was immoral, he replied that the Jews were trying to save themselves from the disaster threatening them in Europe, and, therefore, their morality trumped the morality of the Arabs in

Palestine.

Most Zionists were not prepared to accept this force-oriented approach. They searched fervently for a moral justification they could live with.

Thus started the long quest for justifications - with each pretext supplanting the previous one, according to the changing spiritual fashions in the world.

THE FIRST justification was precisely the one mocked by Jabotinsky: we were actually coming to benefit the Arabs. We shall redeem them from their primitive living conditions, from ignorance and disease. We shall teach them modern methods of agriculture and bring them advanced medicine. Everything - except employment, because we needed every job for the Jews we were bringing here, which we were transforming >from ghetto-Jews into a people of workers and tillers of the soil.

When the ungrateful Arabs went on to resist our grand project, in spite of all the benefits we were supposedly bringing them, we found a Marxist justification: It's not the Arabs who oppose us, but only the "effendis". The rich Arabs, the great landowners, are afraid that the glowing example of the egalitarian Hebrew community would attract the exploited Arab proletariat and cause them to rise against their oppressors.

That, too, did not work for long, perhaps because the Arabs saw how the Zionists bought the land from those very same "effendis" and drove out the tenants who had been cultivating it for generations.

The rise of the Nazis in Europe brought masses of Jews to the country. The Arab public saw how the land was being withdrawn from under their feet, and started a rebellion against the British and the Jews in 1936. Why, the Arabs asked, should they pay for the persecution of the Jews by the Europeans? But the Arab Revolt gave us a new justification: the Arabs support the Nazis. And indeed, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin al-Husseini, was photographed sitting next to Hitler. Some people "discovered" that the Mufti was the real instigator of the Holocaust. (Years later it was revealed that Hitler had detested the Mufti, who had no influence whatsoever over the Nazis.)

World War II came to an end, to be followed by the 1948 war. Half of the vanquished Palestinian people became refugees. That did not trouble the Zionist conscience, because everybody knew: They ran away of their own free will. Their leaders had called upon them to leave their homes, to return later with the victorious Arab armies. True, no evidence was ever found to support this absurd claim, but it has sufficed to soothe our conscience to this day.

It may be asked: why were the refugees not allowed to come back to their homes once the war was over? Well, it was they who in 1947 rejected the UN partition plan and started the war. If because of this they lost 78% of their country, they have only themselves to blame.

Then came the Cold War. We were, of course, on the side of the "Free World", while the great Arab leader, Gamal Abd-al-Nasser, got his weapons from the Soviet bloc. (True, in the 1948 war the Soviet arms flowed to us, but that's not important.) It was quite clear: No use talking with the Arabs, because they support Communist tyranny.

But the Soviet bloc collapsed. "The terrorist organization called PLO", as Menachem Begin used to call it, recognized Israel and signed the Oslo agreement. A new justification had to be found for our unwillingness to give back the occupied territories to the Palestinian people.

The salvation came from America: a professor named Samuel Huntington wrote a book about the "Clash of

Civilizations". And so we found the mother of all pretexts.

THE ARCH-ENEMY, according to this theory, is Islam. Western Civilization, Judeo-Christian, liberal, democratic, tolerant, is under attacked from the Islamic monster, fanatical, terrorist, murderous.

Islam is murderous by nature. Actually, "Muslim" and "terrorist" are synonymous. Every Muslim is a terrorist, every terrorist a Muslim.

A sceptic might ask: How did it happen that the wonderful Western culture gave birth to the Inquisition, the pogroms, the burning of witches, the annihilation of the Native Americans, the Holocaust, the ethnic cleansings and other atrocities without number - but that was in the past. Now Western culture is the embodiment of freedom and progress.

Professor Huntington was not thinking about us in particular. His task was to satisfy a peculiar American craving: the American empire always needs a virtual, world-embracing enemy, a single enemy which includes all the opponents of the United States around the world. The Communists delivered the goods - the whole world was divided between Good Guys (the Americans and their supporters) and Bad Guys (the Commies). Everybody who opposed American interests was automatically a Communist - Nelson Mandela in South Africa, Salvador Allende in Chile, Fidel Castro in Cuba, while the masters of Apartheid, the death squads of Augusto Pinochet and the secret police of the Shah of Iran belonged, like us, to the Free World.

When the Communist empire collapsed, America was suddenly left without a world-wide enemy. This vacuum has now been filled by the Muslims-Terrorists. Not only Osama bin Laden, but also the Chechnyan freedom fighters, the angry North-African youth of the Paris banlieus, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, the insurgents in the Philippines.

Thus the American world view rearranged itself: a good world (Western Civilization) and a bad world (Islamic civilization). Diplomats still take care to make a distinction between "radical Islamists" and "moderate Muslims", but that is only for appearances' sake. Between ourselves, we know of course that they are all Osama bin Ladens. They are all the same.

This way, a huge part of the world, composed of manifold and very different countries, and a great religion, with many different and even opposing tendencies (like Christianity, like Judaism), which has given the world unmatched scientific and cultural treasures, is thrown into one and the same pot.

THIS WORLD VIEW is tailored for us. Indeed, the world of the clashing civilizations is, for us, the best of all possible worlds.

The struggle between Israel and the Palestinians is no longer a conflict between the Zionist movement, which came to settle in this country, and the Palestinian people, which inhabited it. No, it has been from the very beginning a part of a world-wide struggle which does not stem >from our aspirations and actions. The assault of terrorist Islam on the Western world did not start because of us. Our conscience can be entirely clean - we are among the good guys of this world.

This is now the line of argument of official Israel: the Palestinians elected Hamas, a murderous Islamic movement. (If it didn't exist, it would have to be invented - and indeed, some people assert it was created from the start by our secret service.) Hamas is terroristic, and so is Hizbullah. Perhaps Mahmoud Abbas is not a terrorist himself, but he is weak and Hamas is about to take sole control over all Palestinian territories. So we cannot talk with them. We have

no partner. Actually, we cannot possibly have a partner, because we belong to Western Civilization, which Islam wants to eradicate.

IN HIS 1896 book "Der Judenstaat", Theodor Herzl, the official Israeli "Prophet of the State", prophesied this development, too.

This is what he wrote in 1896: "For Europe we shall constitute (in Palestine) a part of the wall against Asia, we shall serve as a vanguard of culture against barbarism."

Herzl was thinking of a metaphoric wall, but in the meantime we have put up a very real one. For many, this is not just a Separation Wall between Israel and Palestine. It is a part of the world-wide wall between the West and Islam, the front-line of the Clash of Civilizations. Beyond the wall there are not men, women and children, not a conquered and oppressed Palestinian population, not choked towns and villages like Abu-Dis, a-Ram, Bil'in and Qalqilia. No, beyond the wall there are a billion terrorists, multitudes of blood-thirsty Muslims, who have only one desire in life: to throw us into the sea, simply because we are Jews, part of Judeo-Christian Civilization.

With an official position like that - who is there to talk to? What is there to talk about? What is the point of meeting in Annapolis or anywhere else?

And what is left to us to do - to cry or to laugh?