

A Window into the Middle East: Interview with Haim Harari

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In 2004, internationally known physicist Haim Harari was invited to address the advisory board of a major multinational corporation. In a short speech he offered a penetrating analysis of the components of terror, and presented a passionate call for a new era in the Middle East. The speech, entitled "A View from the Eye of the Storm," was not intended for publication, but when a copy was leaked and posted onto the Internet, it caused a worldwide sensation, eventually being translated into more than half a dozen languages.

In his upcoming book "A View from the Eye of the Storm", Harari includes a thorough response to the conventional wisdom about Middle Eastern affairs, including a frank dissection of the media's lopsided portrait of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Drawing on his family's two centuries of life in the Middle East, he offers a compelling catalog of the steps necessary to reach a lasting peace between Israel and the Palestinians -- steps, he writes, that are "inevitable -- not because everybody accepts them today, but because all sides must accept them before peace can be achieved." And he urges the civilized world to combat terror by isolating its state sponsors, blocking its funding, and promoting education, women's equality, and human rights reform.

Ryan Mauro: Mr. Harari, can you explain why you feel that anti-American Islamism would have emerged in the Middle East regardless of our policy towards Israel?

Haim Harari: I find relatively little correlation between anti-American feelings and anti-Israeli feelings. Consider a few examples:

- Saudi Arabia is definitely anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic. It is not at all against the U.S. It is entirely dependent on the U.S.
- Al Qaida was born from anti-Saudi (and therefore anti-American) interests, not related at all to Israel. Israel was added to the list of "enemies of Al Qaida" only years later, when it was a helpful tool for gaining further support in the Arab world. It is a fact that Al Qaida does not at all "play" in the Israeli front.
- Saddam was anti-American because the U.S. took away his prize, Kuwait, not because of any relation to Israel.

- Iran has coined the phrase: "The big Satan (U.S.) and the little Satan (Israel)" but Iran itself is clearly anti-American since the U.S. support of the regime of the Shah, (remember the American hostages of the Carter era), totally unrelated to Israel.

Claiming that the U.S. is being punished for "its support of Israel" is, of course, a wonderful way of pressuring the U.S. to turn against Israel. Like many other claims in the Middle East, it is more fiction than fact. The only way the U.S. could get the seal of approval from those who play this game, is to help them destroy Israel completely and annihilate its people. Nothing short of that will satisfy the group who blames the U.S. policy on Israel for all the misfortunes in the region. Since U.S. support for destroying Israel is unrealistic, the claim will persist and there will always be people who will be fooled by it. It is a fact that whenever the U.S. played the "honest broker", e.g. in the Egypt-Israel and the Jordan-Israel peace agreements, nothing was changed in the attitude of the various Arab regimes and terrorist groups towards America.

RM: Does anti-Americanism in Islamic countries, particularly Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, necessarily result in the emerging of a terrorist infrastructure or supply of suicide bombers?

HH: I do not believe that the infrastructure of terror has anything to do with anti-Americanism, or, for that matter, with anti-Israel feelings. Look at all the internal wars within the Arab world. Is the genocide in Sudan triggered by anything related to Israel or America? Was the Afghanistan situation related to anti-American feelings? Did Egypt fight for years in Yemen, including the use of chemical weapons, because of anything related to America or Israel? Did Saddam murder the Kurds with poison gas because of America? Did he conquer Kuwait because of America or Israel? I believe that there is no evidence at all that the ruthlessness, cruelty and suicidal features of these societies have any relation to anything done by America or Israel. The Palestinians massacred all the Jews of Hebron as early as 1929, nineteen years before Israel existed. They supported the Nazis, not because of anti-American feelings and probably not even because of anti-Jewish attitudes. The Algerians are not murdering the inhabitants of entire villages because of America. A society does not produce wholesale suicide murders because of something that someone else is doing. It must come from within that society. As I argue in my book "A View from the Eye of the Storm" a society that produces suicide murderers in quantity is essentially committing its own suicide.

RM: Do you feel the American invasion of Iraq and visible military presence throughout the region has boosted anti-Americanism?

HH: Yes. Anti-American feelings in Iraq are clearly fueled by the occupation. The Iraqis are a proud nation. Most of them know that the U.S. saved them from tyranny, but their gut feeling is that they would not want anyone to occupy their country. Thinking Iraqis probably realize that the transition between Saddam's horrors and real freedom must take its time and necessitates an intermediate period of foreign intervention. However, the "person in the street" wants to be free of foreign rulers, hence anti-American feelings.

RM: How concerned should we be that democratic reform in certain countries will give power to people of an anti-American nature that will set back our progress in the War on Terror?

HH: This is a real danger. The issue is not necessarily anti-American forces, but fanatic fundamentalism of the type that breeds terror. A fully democratic society, including free press, rule of law, religious freedom, free speech, a proper judicial system, equality of women and other normal attributes of full democracy, will not lead to such a regime. But the mere act of an election, without the above infrastructure in place, can easily lead to a victory of those forces that produce the worse incitement, who are the most extreme and who spread the most lies. This already happened in Algeria, but was luckily reversed by an undemocratic military coup. It almost happened in Turkey, where the Islamic party won the election. Iran would like to see it happen in Iraq and will do everything to reach this goal. In my book I present a thorough discussion of how the terrorist groups show great ingenuity in exploiting every single component of Western democracy in attacking this same democracy.

RM: Genuine democratic activists in the Middle East often have to take an anti-American stance in order to rid themselves of accusations of being an "American puppet". How long will this last and does this mean we should refrain from visibly assisting pro-democracy groups?

HH: I believe that your assumption is not necessarily correct. The Arab masses are not really anti-American. They may burn American flags in well orchestrated street demonstrations but America is for them the land of opportunity. Ask the majority of Arab immigrants who came to America. America, with all its problems, is something they look forward to imitate.

RM: How can you not connect the burning of US flags and violent demonstrations in the Arab world with anti-Americanism?

HH: A short time before the Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement, fierce anti-Israeli demonstrations took place in Cairo. When the first Israelis visited Cairo after the agreement, a couple of years later, they were received like lost brothers. There are 70 Million Egyptians. If 10,000 of them burn American flags, what can we learn from it?

RM: Some say radical Sunni and Shia groups won't cooperate, and that terrorist groups wouldn't cooperate with secular regimes such as in Syria and when he was in power, Saddam Hussein. Do you find that theory to be accurate?

HH: It is absolutely clear that this is not correct. It is a fact that predominantly Shiite Iran, a clear theocracy, collaborates very closely with predominantly Sunni secular Syria in supporting the Shiite Hizbullah terrorists who are now funding the Sunni Palestinian Hamas and Islamic Jihad terrorists. The headquarters of the Hamas, clearly a religious organization, is in secular Damascus.

RM: How come it appears there isn't a powerful moderate Muslim force to counter the radical media and governments of the region?

HH: There are powerful moderate forces, such as King Abdullah of Jordan and several of the rulers of the Gulf States. None of them were democratically elected, because no Arab country has a full democracy (which is much more than just holding elections). These leaders do express themselves against terror but they never come out in a strong way against the religious preachers who provide the ideological infrastructure to the terrorist groups. The radical Arab media always operate from those Arab countries which are slightly less dictatorial, like Lebanon and Qatar. The total dictatorships do not allow any uncontrolled broadcast, and the incitement requires a certain level of independence or else no one would pay attention to it.

RM: Do you feel Islam as a whole, and the Greater Middle East region in particular, is growing more or less radical and anti-American?

HH: The Muslim Middle East is facing a choice. It must either peacefully reform itself or fight a World War III against all of Western civilization. In the latter case, the Islamic groups and States will certainly lose the war at a terrible cost to their ordinary citizens. There are more and more Muslims who understand this choice and, of course, know that reform is the preferred way. But, when you watch a fanatic dictatorship, even if you know that its collapse is a historic necessity, you can never predict when this collapse will take place. In the long term, I am optimistic, but the next few years may still get worse before anything improves. Remember that most of the momentous events in the Middle East, both positive and negative, were never predicted by anyone, even one month before they happened (e.g. September 11, the 1967 Six Day war, Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, Saddam's invasion of Kuwait, the murder of Rabin, the murder of Sadat, Arafat's death, Libya's "born again" behavior, the 1973 Yom Kippur war, the genocide in Sudan).

RM: How likely is it we will see the people of Syria and Iran force a regime change?

HH: No one can tell. Syria is definitely more volatile, because of its economic near-collapse and the fact that its regime is based on a small ethnic minority (the Alawites). Iran has strong undercurrents of forces opposing the regime, but they do not seem to be able to marshal enough strength to effect a change. In a way, the situation in Iran resembles the Soviet Union in the 1980's. The regime must collapse, sooner or later, but we have no way of predicting when it will happen. And until it happens, Iran continues to be the number one danger to the world.

RM: Some say the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt will gain tremendous power there should there be fair elections. Should we be concerned?

HH: We should definitely be concerned, but I am not at all sure that anyone can really predict the numbers. Since Egypt does not have the full infrastructure of a proper democracy, there is definitely a danger of an election success of the most fanatic element, which is, indeed, the Muslim brothers.

RM: What steps need to be taken to bring peace to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

HH: I have discussed this in detailed in my book, especially chapter 29 which is entirely devoted to the subject. I find it very difficult to express it all in a few sentences. But one thing is clear - the Sharon disengagement plan is a crucial positive step, but after it – hostilities will resume. I do believe that peace will arrive to the region. It may take another decade or two and much more blood before we see it happen.

RM: What are the greatest misunderstandings of current affairs you try to tackle in your book?

HH: Here are some of the points:

- The world crisis is not centered on or dominated by the Israeli-Arab dispute.
- Terror must be faced by a two prong attack: An aggressive military campaign against terrorists and their protectors and a massive campaign for women equality, literacy, openness, human rights and rule of law in the Muslim world.
- The European attitude of appeasement is dangerous and futile.
- International law today is unable to address the issue of terror sponsored by states which deny their support.
- Media coverage of terror is intrinsically slanted, partly because of the asymmetric situation, partly because of the fear factor and partly because of the dependence of media on local talent
- In the Israeli-Arab conflict it is important to distinguish between the conventional level of the dispute (where will the borders be, settlements, land, water, etc) and the "annihilation level" of the dispute (destroying Israel, "right of return"). The conventional level is solvable, the annihilation level is not.