Wisdom-based Foreign Relations

The following article began its life in late-2008 as a Wisdom Project Special Paper that I had been asked to write for a senior political official in Britain. He was curious as to what the agency of wisdom might practically offer political and religious leaders and their advisers working in the field of Western ? Middle East relations. I later revised and expanded the Paper into this article for a wider audience.

If it seems like a lengthy piece, it's not, when compared to all the regional and global issues and intersections involved. I was selective, and specialists in the field will understand this. For visitors to this page who may like more about the wisdom-based way of reasoning that informs this article, see: a summary review of the historic wisdom tradition and its literature, which looks with fresh eyes at the tradition and its relevance for today.

Seeing International Relations and
Foreign Policy through Different Eyes]
Five Norms of Wisdom for Thinking about More Cooperative Relations
between the United States and the Muslim Middle East
by Charles Strohmer

A reflection from the sage Qoheleth:
"I came to see this as wisdom under the sun and it
appeared great to me. There was a small city with few
men in it, and a great king came to it, surrounded it,
and constructed large siegeworks against it. Now
there was found in the city a poor but wise man,
and he saved the city from war by his wisdom. Yet
afterward no one remembered that poor man or his
words. So I said, "Wisdom is better than strength.
Wisdom is better than weapons of war."
War and Peace. We have lived with both since the earliest days of our history, when brother first slew brother and third-party intervention set forth the terms of a settlement meant to prevent its escalation. Fat chance of that. If history is testimony to anything, it reveals a race of people whose preference for solving its differences through nonviolence stretches just so far and then snaps. There are of course many and varied reasons for this, and we don't have to look any further than the vast literature of international relations and foreign policy to find these reasons explained and subjected to analyses of all sorts. Despite this expanding universe of commentary, however, the surge from peace to war remains an enduringly lamentable history of human affairs. War cannot be explained away.

In our day, political ideology can be implicated in the causes of war, and my goal in this essay is to offer some ideas salient of the historic wisdom tradition as a way for our national leaders and their policymakers to avoid sectarian ideological interests that can not only lead to war but impede or obstruct human flourishing on the international scene. I see this way ahead as particularly urgent when the political leadership of the United States and Iran, for instance, in their dependence on ideologically driven attempts to make nice with each other, seem to be bringing the world closer to a war over Iran's nuclear program. Before that threshold is crossed, it might be wise if everyone paused, took some deep breaths, counted to ten, and then reasoned together about the alternative way of wisdom.

In short, the wisdom way is a non-ideological way for enabling human flourishing across boundaries. After years of research into the international aspects of the historic wisdom tradition, I've become convinced that it is a missing jewel in today's bilateral and multilateral relations. For it offers world leaders and foreign policy advisors a way to transcend, so to speak, ideological sticking points that may contribute to war while helping them to find reasonable and responsible approaches to defuse adversarial relations

and to build more cooperative international arrangements. This seems particularly important given the absolutized ideological interests that came to dominate the practice of U.S. foreign policy for much of the first decade of the new millennium.

The following material has been adapted from a book I am writing about wisdom-based approaches to relations between the United States and countries of the Muslim Middle East. It enters an energetic foreign policy conversation about those relations that has been taking place in the halls of power, think tanks, universities, and across dinner tables ever since powerful jet engines traveling five hundred miles an hour disappeared with a burr into the Twin Towers. I believe wisdom-based approaches will help national leaders and their policymakers search out and find ways wiser than war for Western?Mideast relations.

To readers in the foreign policy community, I apologize for ignoring many aspects and nuances of the conversation that you may be interested in. To other readers, I apologize for taking you into the middle of a foreign policy conversation whose antecedents you may be not be familiar with. I hope to cover these sufficiently for all of you in the book, but you are also welcome to contact me about them in the meantime. (My sincere thanks to numerous political and religious leaders and advisors ? Muslims, Christians, Jews, and secularists ? in America and elsewhere ? who have taken time from their busy schedules to comment on various stages in this material's development and encourage me to ?keep going.? Any errors, however, are mine.)

What I hope to accomplish, in what follows, is to briefly introduce some basic features surrounding five norms of wisdom for international relations and foreign policy in the context of U.S.?Middle East relations. In the inescapable drama that is human life and death, wisdom cries both in the halls of power and in the street for us to listen to what she has to say about building more cooperative arrangements between peoples who are different. As noted international relations theorist Jonathan Schell has said in his remarkable book The Unconquerable World, it is time that we addressed the larger and more fundamental questions about war and peace and greatly de-emphasize the war system and institute more peaceable paths. ?Force can only lead to more force, not to peace,? Schell writes. ?Only a turn to structures of cooperative power can offer hope.?

There has been a lot of political dislocation, internationally, in recent years, as a result of the national worldview crises that America and countries of the Muslim Middle East have been faced with since the attacks of 9/11 and the ensuing responses. New ways of reasoning are desperately needed. Leaderships need new ideas and we all need to be discussing them. The following is not scientific formulae but some wisdom-based possibilities for fresh thought, creativity, and action.

Preliminary remarks

Some readers may object to my use of the word ?secular? in this article because for them there is no dualism between the secular and the scared and thus no such thing as ?secular? life. Instead, ?all of life is religious.? This does not mean that everyone participates in overtly religious activities all day, every day. Of course they don't. It means that people hold deep faith commitments about life. And this is true for everyone, but everyone, including atheists and secularists. In this view, even atheist individuals or secularly-based societies have ultimate faith assumptions (commitments to beliefs about what lies behind the material world that cannot be proved but must be taken by faith). Nevertheless, life proceeds in the direction of the ultimate faith commitment that an individual or a society holds. That faith may be in human autonomy, or a closed universe, or nationalism, and so on, and it usually lies in the background of an individual's or society's life, being taken for granted.

Until recent years, however, when faith taken for granted in the West (?secular? faith) has been made conscious to an often sleepy public square, if only through best-selling, controversial books from so-called new atheists such as Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, who have, in their polemics against religion, unembarrassingly explained where their own faith lies. The essayist Christopher Hitchens is another, and in ?Christopher Hitchens: Man of Faith,? an essay responding to his book god is not Great, I proved, as much as it is possible to prove about deep faith commitments, the title of the essay.

So I am sympathetic to the ?all of life is religious? view, but I am unwilling to drop the word ?secular? or employ it only as if it were describing some sort of bad disease. I am using it as it is found on the lips of common usage, in which ?secular? merely denotes things that are not considered ?religious.?

I am using both words, then, in what could be called their normally understood sense, rather than in the technical sense meant by the ?all of life is religious? theologians. In common usage, religion is about how people express the commitment they have to God

symbolically and what goes on in their churches, mosques, or synagogues. It is about their rituals, sacred books, theology, explicit witness, or devotional activities such as prayer and worship. Distinct from that is what people have learned to call ?secular,? a word to describe what takes place outside of their churches, synagogues, or mosques. It is used to point to aspects of life such as the arts, science, law, business, politics, legal processes, social relationships, and so on, and especially often, to one's work in the world. (See: John Peck & Charles Strohmer, Uncommon Sense: God's Wisdom for Our Complex and Changing World.)

My main source of inspiration for the five norms introduced here comes from years of studying the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Christian Bible, and the scholarship that has grown up around the wisdom literature of both sources. This literature arose in the old-world Middle East, and what took me be surprise and began to grip my imagination was: 1) how much of it surrounds the foreign policy of the time, 2) that this dimension of the literature is largely overlooked by scholarship, and 3) how winsome, believable, and relevant the narrative is for our contemporary Middle East situation with its religious and ?secular? actors.Adversarial bilateral relations then get caught in a trap in which each nation feels that it is being forced to sign off on what amounts to the sectarian demands of the other's ideological checklist

Also, this essay assumes that political ideology, whether secular or religious, or some composite of both, can influence, if not control, the decisions and moves of a state's leadership in its talks with another state's leadership. This approach to international relations has figured large in the prevention of wars between modern Western democracies because, although these democracies are not identical, they have much political ideology and social structure in common that is typically called secular. A similar history can be found in the Arab world, or across the larger Islamic world, whose countries have enough religious ideology in common to sway its many and varied governments from going to war with each other.

However, in relations between countries of the West and of the Muslim Middle East, that history, as everyone knows, has been one of war as much as it has been of peace. Some of the blame for the wars lies at the feet of national leaders and their policymakers (on all sides) who relied too exclusively on political ideology for a thaw in their nation's relations with an adversarial nation. That approach usually doesn't work. No one likes to be forced. And so the other nation responds in kind. Adversarial bilateral relations then get caught in a trap in which each nation feels that it is being forced to sign off on what amounts to the sectarian demands of the other's ideological checklist. This figures huge in the situation between the United States and Iran today (President Obama's more pragmatic approach may not in the end be able to change this, and the ultrafundamentalist ideologues of the Iranian regime don't seem to want to). Instead of this lose-lose scenario, I believe the wisdom tradition offers diplomats, negotiators, and policymakers, as well as the domestic populations of both countries, under creative and responsible leaders, the potential for moving into a win-win situation.

Introducing five norms of wisdom

I have identified five norms for international relations (there may be more) in the historic wisdom narrative, and to these I have given the names: peaceableness (e.g., peacemaking, peacebuilding, the pursuit of cooperative agreements and arrangements); relations (among people who are different); insight (from learned lessons and relevant other experiences); skill (in diplomacy and negotiations; preventing and resolving problems and crises between states); and mutuality (the common ground interests, values, and concerns shared by all peoples everywhere). The acronym p.r.i.s.m. makes a convenient memory aid for these five norms, but the categories are by no means airtight. In the light they shed on our subject, there's plenty of overlap among the norms.

Right off the bat, Christian readers will notice that wisdom-based approaches to foreign policy are about something quite different than finding clever verses from the Book of Proverbs and somehow getting our elected leaders to apply them. And although scholars do not see a wisdom literature per se in the Quran that corresponds with that of the Bible, Muslim readers will notice, in these five norms of wisdom, correspondences to features of the broader Islamic understanding of ijtihad (see ?Two Theories of Ijtihad,? M. A. Muqtedar Khan, on the Web). Foreign policy specialists, of course, will have recognized in the p.r.i.s.m. normative roles that diplomacy has played ever since kingdom first learned how to get along with kingdom, so it must not be concluded that anything completely new is being introduced here. However, rather than being informed by the wisdom way, the norms that have given direction to the practice of international relations traditionally have been shaped by religious ideologies (e.g., Europe under Constantinianism, or the Middle East under the Ottomans) or by ?secular? ideologies (e.g., the modern West's political idealism and realism and their derivatives, or neoconservatism).the norms of wisdom would provide somewhat of a different energy, shape, and trajectory for the formation of international relations

So constructed today, bilateral or multilateral relations between nations that are quite different can easily freeze over. This does not mean that every compass point of modern statecraft has been or will be unwise or destructive. It does mean that the norms of wisdom would provide somewhat of a different energy, shape, and trajectory for the formation of international relations than national leaders, religious figures, and foreign policy specialists might intuitively perceive as possible from the paradigms that have become second nature to them.

Some of the following therefore may seem a bit foreign, if not alien, if only because the vast literature of modern international relations scholarship does not go back far enough. As a rule it starts with the early Greeks, such as Plato or Thucydides and the latter's great work on the Peloponnesian War. I understand why classical Greece is the common starting point for international relations studies today, but I would like to suggest that it does not take students back far enough to learn from a time and a place, the old-world Middle East, when international politics was not so beholden to abstractions. There is precious little scholarship about this period of international relations. (Amarna Diplomacy: The Beginnings of International Relations, edited by Raymond Cohen and Raymond Westbrook, is a notable exception, as is the little book Prophets and Wise Men by William McKane, if you can find it.)
The wisdom norm of peaceableness
In its appraisal of human nature, the historic wisdom tradition is not idealistic but realistic. That is, the wisdom literature acknowledges a tragic flaw in human nature. Paradoxically, however, almost in defiance of that realism, the paths of wisdom are fundamentally about peace, as the literature makes clear, such as in the Hebrew Bible (Proverbs 3:17) and the Christian New Testament (James 3:17). Wisdom calls people who are different to find and build on cooperative ways of life in their relationships with each other. (By the way, don't think that this is a ?religious? article just because I've now cited two religious sources. The most reliable literature we have of the historic wisdom tradition appears in those sources, and that literature is not about religious life per se, e.g., the way we worship, pray, share our faith, theologize, and the like. Instead, it is chiefly concerned with the affairs, issues, and struggles of what today we typically refer to as secular life, including international relations.)

In both sources also, although wisdom cries in the halls of power for nations to beat their swords into plowshares, the narrative is realistic about the possibilities. Here we are in this world, where Kalashnikovs, cruise missiles, and nuclear weaponry outnumber plowshares; where even the pragmatic foreign policies of the West and the Muslim Middle East remain guided by sectarian ideologies; and where Samuel Huntington's thesis about a pending clash of civilizations seem horribly too imaginable. Are the peaceable paths of wisdom for another world? Or do they intersect with the long and winding troubled roads of our world's international relations to show us ways to more cooperative arrangements? Does the wisdom norm of peaceableness have resources for us and for our leaders now, in this world? Let's seethe paths of wisdom are fundamentally about peace

In the modern inter-state system, the ?absence of war,? which is largely what the system means by ?peace,? can end when the political ideology of one nation starts to conflict too practically with that of another nation (often over economic realities). To prevent that end, diplomacy and negotiations become critical. But as someone has said, the two world wars of the twentieth century removed all doubts that peacemaking is one of the most ticklish tasks of diplomacy. Too right. And today we would add the U.S.-led war about Iraq to that notion.

It is commonly misunderstood by non-specialists that the same principles apply to easing tensions between adversarial nations as apply to settling disputes between individuals, so, they ask, why all the fuss? Peacemaking in the international community, however, is in fact exponentially more difficult. In Moral Man and Immoral Society, Christian political writer Reinhold Niebuhr put it this way, in his compound-complex way of reasoning: Individuals, being moral, ?are able to consider interests other than their own in determining problems of conduct, and are capable, on occasion, of preferring the advantages of others to their own.... Their rational faculty prompts them to a sense of justice which educational discipline may refine and purge of egoistic elements until they are able to view a social situation, in which their own interests are involved, with a fair measure of objectivity. But all these achievements are more difficult, if not impossible, for human societies and social groups. In every human group [Niebuhr included nations in this designation] there is less reason to guide and check impulses, less ability to comprehend the needs of others and therefore more unrestrained egoism than the individuals, who compose the group, reveal in their personal relationships.? It is a dilemma between what Niebuhr often called an individualistic ethic and a collectivist ethic. Diplomats, negotiators, and international mediators are among those who ply their craft in the latter context.

The wisdom norm of peaceableness recognizes that there are different principles for thawing adversarial bilateral or multilateral relations than for, say, mending a marriage. Within this collective human predicament, when conflicting national interests are pressed egoistically, if not demonically, against one another, or when the threat of war arises, the wisdom norm of peaceableness urges national leaders and their diplomats and foreign policy advisors to back it down and concentrate instead on the better angels of human nature, the goal being to marginalize the absolutized ideological interests that have come to control the relations. Under the guidance of creative and prudent leaders, the wisdom way, then, would provide a means for the parties to talk through sticking point issues and seek agreements in areas that were not possible when conflicting ideologies became absolutized, adhered to, and controlled or ended talks between their nations.

Also, the cooperative international relations that this norm seeks is not that which is pushed and pursued by absolutized ideological interests, in which the word ?peace? is one-sided. Frequently when war is on the horizon, one party will say, ?We only want peaceable relations with them,? but the other party is thinking, ?You just want peace for yourself. You're just out for your own good. What about my good?? Because the wisdom norm of peaceableness is motivated by mutual good, a question for each party not only becomes how can we prevent war but, ?How can I help with your well-being??successful bilateral or multilateral talks informed by the wisdom way will not just be the absence of war but cooperation ordered toward the flourishing of the countries

The rewards of successful bilateral or multilateral talks informed by the wisdom way will not just be the absence of war but cooperation ordered toward the flourishing of the countries. For this kind of peace to be successful in the long run, however, international policy agreements must capture the hearts and minds of the domestic populations the policymakers represent; in other words, major policy pursued between two (or more) nations must be seen as legitimate by a large percentage of the domestic populations in question if it is to succeed. I will say more about this under the norm of relations.

Here, I just note that although foreign policy decision making is not particularly ?democratic? ? it is superintended by the relatively small community of a state's foreign policy elite, who do not submit their policies to a direct popular vote ? domestic attitudes loom large in a nation's international politics, especially about the big questions of war and peace. If, for example, a large enough number of American voters favor adversarial relations with Iran, that collective attitude will carry considerable weight in Washington's policies toward Iran, even if the Obama White House wants to keep talking. Conversely, however, if a large percentage of Iranians favor, as they do, friendlier relations between Iran and the United States, it is unlikely that that would carry much weight with the hardline ultrafundamentalist elite that controls Iran's foreign policy apparatus (their repression and violence against Iran's reformist leaders and electorate demonstrates this, especially since the disputed June 2009 presidential elections).

In another part of the Middle East, majorities among both the Israelis and the Palestinians still want to see formal peaceable relations established between them. Were this not so, it would be foolish for the Quartet and the League of Arab States still to be favoring a two-state solution, especially given the endemic violence that gnaws at the loom of peace. It seems to me that there is a gut-wrenching sense of wisdom at work, here, in the cry of these two majority domestic populations for a final agreement. Having recognized that neither side is going to attain perfect justice in a final agreement, both populations are nevertheless showing an inordinate amount of patience in being willing and able to absorb (so far) acute pain and suffering, tragedies of death, hope deferred, and more as a sign of their enduringly mutual commitment to an equitable peace. Where do they get this from? Not from any political ideology that I am aware of. There may be a clearer present-day illustration of two adversarial peoples relying on the wisdom norm of peaceableness. But perhaps not.

The wisdom norm of relations

Wisdom is not an abstraction, not an -ology, or an -ism. Wisdom is the epitome of the personal. We see this in the literature's personification of wisdom (such as in the Book of Proverbs chapters 1-9) as an attractive, prudent, virtuous, and competent woman who offers sage advice to others about the life in the world that she shares with God. (In the literature, she is contrasted to another attractive woman, a temptress whom fools follow to their destruction.) In the Christian New Testament, the personal silhouette of wisdom is manifest in the understanding of Jesus Christ as the wisdom of God. And it is probably true that more books have been written about Jesus' views on relationships than any other religious figure.

The wisdom norm of relations is dependent on the personal mien of wisdom. Thus in the literature wisdom is found plying her craft

not in ivory towers but in the midst of human interaction (it's a prominent theme). Although, as religious traditions indicate, we may pray to God for wisdom, the literature explains that wisdom may be searched out and found among human beings in their varied relationships with each other, and, importantly, not just among the like-minded but also among those who are different and who are learning from each other. This becomes crucial, of course, to the specialists who work in the field of international relations. Frankly, however, the word relations in this designation today denotes much more about conceptual connections between the abstract entities called states than it does about relationships between the real entities who are the peoples of those nations. (There's a sad irony in this. The rise and spread of ?democracy? the past couple hundred years was meant, in part, to help nations see themselves not only as states but as peoples.) So let's think about different domestic populations, or societies, for a minute.

The wisdom norm of relations can pay huge dividends for the peoples of nations who are quite different from one another and who may have, almost as a default setting, some pretty distorted ideas of each other. Any two people who have ever begun a friendship with each other from quite different cultures or religions knows how much work it took to ditch the caricatures, stereotypes, confused feelings, ignorance, and every other thing that sought to hinder the friendship. Raise the ante to the arena of diverse domestic populations and it's easy to see why, for international agreements, getting to Yes can be terribly difficult.

Diverse domestic populations, however, can learn wisdom from engaging with each other in ways in which even their cultures or religions may not be able to help them. The British wisdom theologian David Ford (Cambridge) suggests that wisdom emerges not so much from what is said between two or more people who are different, but from their cries. ?Wisdom cries? for a hearing in the ?intensities of life,? Ford writes in his fascinating book Christian Wisdom. People cry for what they desire most, for ?love, justice, truth, goodness, compassion, children, health, food and drink, education, security, and so on.? And ?Christian wisdom? he writes, ?is discerned within earshot of those cries.... The insistence of the cries lends urgency to the search for wisdom. The persistence of the cries, together with the diversity and, often, novelty of their challenges, constantly expands the search and refuses to allow it to rest in any closure.? In other words, wisdom comes when, together, we openly and honestly listen to each other's cries for justice, peace, cooperation, and so on. That is, wisdom is not an end. It is a way, a non-ideological way, to justice, peace, cooperation.wisdom is concerned not so much with concepts as with situations

It may take getting used to a little less reliance on our ideological orientations than we think, but this mutual searching for wisdom is especially significant for reaching international agreements between peoples who are very different indeed. I believe diplomats and negotiators have a special role to play in serving to make this happen. (I have found both the English School and some constructivist approaches to international relations, in their emphases on international society and the social dimensions of life, a pleasant relief from the ideological checklists, reified abstractions, and causal materialism that has shaped and given direction to political science theory and practice, and that thus has seen international life much more in terms of system than society.)

The idea of cooperative and peaceable relations has become so normative for the diverse groups who live under Western democracies that we may take it for granted, and we might assume that there is no hope for cooperative and peaceable relations with those who are not like us, such as with the Muslim populations of the Middle East, unless they too become like Western democracies. And vice versa. But that is simply not true. The Muslim world is not without resources here. There is a powerful idea in the Quran, for example, which, if I understand surah 49:13 correctly, affirms that human diversity (male, female, tribes, nations) is part of God's design for us get to know one another. The implication seems to be that God could have made us all the same but in His infinite wisdom chose to make us different, that in our relationships we might learn ways of getting along together. This surah, then, seems to have much in common with the wisdom norm of relations.

A primary idea of the wisdom tradition that may be helpful, here, is that wisdom is concerned not so much with concepts as with situations. Thus for international relations the wisdom way stresses human situations over ideological checklists. Whereas political ideologies (realism, idealism, neoconservatism, and others) emphasize aligning nations around conceptual thinking like iron filings oriented by a magnetic field, wisdom emphasizes situational thinking.

Conceptual thinking is of course so basic to human integrity and activity that we would never want to be without it. We need our ability to think abstractly; I am not arguing against that. For international relations, however, situations between parties need to be explored and sorted, and explored and sorted by the parties themselves, that wisdom for resolving tensions and problems may be

searched out and found by the parties in question.

The creative thinking, then, that searches out wisdom for international agreements comes not from afar. As necessary as outside mediation is in some situations, such as between the Israelis and the Palestinians, wisdom-based solutions for international situations cannot be found apart from engagement between the actors themselves, for wisdom comes to light in moments of understanding between them. (Some of these ideas about ?situations? I have adapted from Abraham Heschel's God in Search of Man.)

For mediators, however, the wisdom norm of relations, being a personal thing, helps them gain an intimate understanding of quarreling parties in ways that conceptual thinking cannot. It helps them immerse themselves in the situation that is being experienced by the parties themselves and the peoples they represent. ?There is little prospect of mediating any conflict,? writes seasoned Middle East negotiator Dennis Ross in The Missing Peace, ?if one does not understand the historical narrative of each side.?relational diplomacy keeps mediators and negotiators aware of two common traps

Chris Seiple, president of the Institute for Global Engagement (IGE), often talks about ?relational diplomacy,? which IGE practices and which it believes is as crucial as traditional diplomacy is between states for understanding situations, ending quarrels, and reaching cooperative agreements. In tough situations between parties, relational diplomacy keeps mediators and negotiators aware of two common traps. One is what Seiple calls ?mirror-image engagement,? in which we expect people of other cultures to think and act like us. The other is ?monolithic engagement,? in which we expect the entire people or government to think and act the same. ?These basic reminders need to take place daily,? Seiple writes, because it is easy to forget that other peoples and governments have different worldviews than we do. Relational diplomacy encourages listening to and learning from others, and in the process ?respect is demonstrated and ?they' will listen, learn, and respect back. A relationship has begun.? (See ?The Art of Relational Diplomacy,? Chris Seiple, on the Web.)

In a similar sense, Michael Schluter, founder of the Relationships Foundation and Concordis International, talks about the need for parity in tough situations, which he sees as ?a real problem between the Arab world and the U.S. or Britain. I think there is a feeling on the Arab side that the West does not really show them respect, doesn't hold them in sufficiently high regard to listen to them carefully, to treat them as equals. Obviously there are inequalities in terms of economics, military technology, and average living standards. But from a relationships point of view I don't think we should measure a country's ?development' simply by its income level.... So on parity there is a real issue here. I think it is fundamentally a question of respect. If we in the West could approach the Arabs with more humility, as if we are really interested in what they are thinking and what is important to them, I think we would find a much stronger basis for cooperation.? (See: Michael Schluter conversation with Charles Strohmer on this site.)

Both Seiple and Schluter and their organizations have some remarkable successes in tough situations. IGE's ongoing and often experimental liaison work between politicians, religious leaders, and policy advisors in Washington and Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province is a case in point, as was the work of the Relationships Foundation and Concordis International in South Africa and Rwanda, and in Sudan with support from the U.S. State Department. Both Schluter and Seiple, however, are quick to point out that building honest and open relationships that lead to breakthroughs in negotiations takes time, is messy, and requires an inordinate amount of patience and persistence. In the process, however, as Seiple notes, ?a space is created where differences are named even as common values are found and strengthened. Now you are ready to have a principled and practical effect based on mutual respect.?

Because relying on the wisdom norm of relations can be a lengthy, demanding, and thorny process, international mediators are, in my book, the unsung heroes of conflict resolution. Former Senator George Mitchell, currently President Obama's Special Envoy for Middle East peace, is a poignant example. During the 1990s, he was dedicated to serving as U.S. Special Envoy to Northern Ireland, and became a key actor in resolving the violent, decade's-long conflict in Northern Ireland. In what has been called a triumph of patience, Mitchell, and not without personal cost, immersed himself in relationships with the fighting parties until he was able to demonstrate a shrewd understanding of the situation and lead the peace talks through endless arguments about procedures and agendas to what became known as the Good Friday Agreement (1998). (Alongside the formal diplomatic track, see Marc Gopin's inspiring book To Make the Earth Whole, for mature insight into what he calls "citizen diplomacy" and its importance in mediation and peacemaking across tough religious and political lines in the Middle East.)

In short, the wisdom norm of relations cries to policymakers and leaders: ?Go beyond the abstract notion of ?nation against nation', see the peoples of the nations as neighbors, and search out international policies with them to enhance their lives.?

The wisdom norm of insight

That we become wiser when we learn from experience is fundamental to the wisdom tradition. When history repeats itself because no one is listening, we become more foolish. Here we have entered a field of vision called insight, and much of the insight that we find in the old-world wisdom writings arose from observation over time, as the sages learned lessons about life and relationships from studying both human behavior and the order of the world to gain understanding of what has been called the ?act-consequence connection.? More popularly: you reap what you sow. The literature abounds with such insights. For example: do not love sleep or you will grow poor; the first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him; for lack of guidance, a nation falls (Proverbs 20:13; 18:17; 11:14). The sages, however, also accepted that there were contradictions to such principles, that, for instance, the godly person may suffer or the crook may prosper. Exceptions to rules, then, is also basic to the tradition's insight about human life and relationships.

Insight gained from learned lessons derives from what the distinguished scholar of the Old Testament Gerard von Rad calls ?experiential knowledge.? In Wisdom in Israel he writes that no one ?would be able to live even for a single day without incurring appreciable harm if he could not be guided by wide practical experience. This experience teaches him to understand events in his surroundings, to foresee the reactions of his fellow men, to apply his own resources at the right point, to distinguish the normal from the unique and more besides.? And yet we may miss the insight an experience offers us, or lack the capacity to register it, perhaps because we are incapable of fitting it into the limits of our current understanding. Because of this, von Rad concludes that experiential knowledge is both very complex and very vulnerable.

If we think for a minute about the bilateral relations between Iran and the United States, we know from their past thirty-year history that the ideological orientations of both governments are implicated in why those relations are now stuck tangled. It is also arguable from history that political leaders of such nations who try to thaw their adversarial relations by hunkering down as loyalists to ideological orientations can be doomed to failure. To put it crudely, if the parties really want to work toward better relations, it's no use to keep relying on tools that tangle. When those tools, however, are ones the leaders and their advisors choose to employ, we also know from history that war, as they say, becomes a continuation of politics. A wisdom-based policy would seek not to cut the knot with the sword but to untangle it.wise insight for more cooperative relations will come from talking to each other outside the ideological box

The bilateral situation between the United States and Iran, not to mention between Israel and Iran, is screaming for fresh insight to move the relationship away from the precipice. The situation needs a reasonable and responsible way ahead that can be accepted as equitable by both governments and their domestic populations. Although Americans tend to be impatient and want to see immediate results, fresh insight for a wiser way ahead in this relationship may come but it will not be easily applied, as President Obama and his foreign policy advisors have discovered. It can take place, though, if the parties are willing to talk openly and honestly and compromise. As Moshe Dayan, an Israeli military leaders, once said, ?If you want to make peace you don't talk to your friends; you talk to your adversaries.?

For American and Iranian leaders, and those of Israel, wise insight for more cooperative relations will come from talking to each other outside the ideological box. Such insight, however, will not emerge overnight in relations as different and difficult as those between America and Iran, or Israel and Iran, are. This is why face-to-face listening of each other's cries is crucial. But as Ringo Starr still sings, ?You know it don't come easy.? In The Prophets, Rabbi Heschel, a seminal figure in twentieth century religious studies and political activism, wrote: ?Insight is a breakthrough, requiring much intellectual dismantling and dislocation.? It is a process that ?begins with a mental interim, with the cultivation of a feeling for the unfamiliar, unparalleled, incredible. It is in being involved with a phenomenon, being intimately engaged to it, courting it, as it were, that after much perplexity and embarrassment we come upon insight ? upon a way of seeing the phenomenon from within. Insight is accompanied by a sense of surprise. What has been closed is suddenly disclosed. It entails genuine perception, seeing anew.?

In The Creative Word, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann calls this way to wisdom a ?great brooding? process. With wisdom, he writes, we are ?in touch with a mystery that cannot be too closely shepherded, as in the Torah, or protested against, as in

the prophets. There is here a not-knowing, a waiting to know, a patience about what is yet to be discerned, and a respect for not knowing that must be honored and not crowded. It works at a different pace because it understands that its secrets cannot be forced.? He continues: ?Wisdom is found in the experience of the specific, concrete experiences which individuals discern for themselves.... That is where wisdom shall be found ? in the stuff of life, the world, our experience.... It holds for the patient, diligent observer what needs to be known.?

Insights from learned lessons help leaders and their advisors apply good judgment for foreign policy decisions. President Obama seems to get this, although it is being strongly resisted by powerful political ideologues in America and Israel, as it is by the ultrafundamentalists who currently rule Iran. It remains to be seen whether the president will be able to sustain even his own personal momentum to keeping talking with Tehran, especially if he keeps getting the runaround by the regime.

In short, wisdom reveals herself in the dialogue among learners. Wisdom is a way of seeing the past in the present to prevent future shock.
The wisdom norm of skillful diplomacy and negotiations
When kings of ancient Egypt, Israel, Assyria, Babylon, and Persia ruled at various times over parts of what is now the modern Middle East, the wisdom way was invaluable in the halls of power for their ambassadors, foreign ministers, policy advisors, and other government officials. One of the principle duties of these high-level old-world officials, writes von Rad, ?was to advise the king on political matters.? Further, despite the different religious ideologies of those kingdoms, which were no less controlling than religious ideology is in today's Middle East, it was the wisdom tradition that provided old-world rulers and their diplomats with a pattern for constructing and conducting their more cooperative international relations.

To use some specialist language for a minute, a broad class of prominent high officials (chiefly men but occasionally some women) within ancient Israel's government were known as the hakamim. (When referring to the class itself, the hakamim are occasionally short-handed in the literature simply as ?the wise.?) They served as what today we would call cabinet ministers, policymakers, statesmen, foreign ministers, secretaries of state, diplomats, and political advisors; occasionally, ecclesiastical figures and even generals were included. Individuals of this sort make brief appearances in the literature as advisors to the pharaohs, and as integral to the rudimentary forming of Israelite jurisprudence under Moses after the flight from Egypt but before the wilderness wanderings had ensued. During that period of Israelite history, hakamim were commissioned as judges to hear disputes and to render their decisions fairly and impartially, whether between two Israelites or between an Israelite and a non-Israelite. [Editor's note: All Hebrew words in this article, such as hakamim, are spelled without their diacritical marks.]

This last point is significant. It often goes unnoticed that ancient Israel's nascent social and political experiment under Moses and Joshua, as well as its later monarchical rule over the land of Canaan, included many peoples who were not Israelites. It was in a pluralistic context, therefore, that ancient Israel's hakamim emerged and evolved as a class of government advisors essential to the proper domestic functioning of Israel's somewhat pluralist society. Quite specific guidelines are given, for instance, to the pre-monarchical hakamim in the Books of Exodus and Deuteronomy, where they are instructed to be impartial ? literally, taking no one's part, or side. They are to hear disputes free from outside pressures and render their decisions fairly between an Israelite and a non-Israelite. (It fascinates me that this began with the sage advice to Moses from Jethro, who was not an Israelite but a Midianite priest.) Further, the goal of the hakamim's impartiality in judging was that there might be peace, shalom, human flourishing within this pluralistic society (see Exodus 18:23).the wisdom norm of skillful diplomacy can be given free rein, or it can be reined in, often depending on the ideological motivation of an administration

Afterward, during the monarchical period, the hakamim were also essential to Israel's proper functioning in its international relations, as scholarship has discovered in the transition of the people Israel into a formal nation (a monarchy), what today we would call a state. Once up and running as a nation among nations, if Israel wanted to benefit as an actor in the international scene, and it did, it would need to be recognized by the region's other nations (also monarchies) as a formal participant in the pattern that had been established for conducting the international relations of that time and place (think of the need today for a new state to join the United Nations and the benefits that would accrue to it). Although religious traditions were part of the mix, there are many indications in the wisdom literature, in other biblical writings, and in modern scholarship to suggest that the wisdom tradition loomed large in the established regional pattern for conducting international relations. Israel's hakamim, then, engaged with their

counterparts in wisdom traditions of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and elsewhere.

In other words, when old-world Israel became a formal nation, it turned a political corner that demanded changes whereby it could gain the kind of international footing that came from being ?like? the other nations. This meant, for instance, enthroning a king, picking a cabinet, raising an army and the taxes to fund both it and the new bureaucracy, drafting and institutionalizing new national laws, establishing a capital, and so on. ?Israel,? writes wisdom scholar William McKane in Prophets and Wise Men, ?became a state with a new political structure which demanded the creation of a cadre of royal officials through whom the king governed....? It was a political structure in which there was associated with the king ?a class of royal officials who had to do with the army, finance, foreign embassies and administration. Such officials were a ?people of the king' and had a common interest with him? both in domestic peace and prosperity and in cooperative international relations. McKane also writes that during the long reigns of Israel's second and third kings, David and Solomon, Israel was strongly in the Egyptian sphere of influence, and that ?we ought to seek there for the models of Solomon's bureaucracy.? His conclusion is that ?the Israelite state was modeled on the great states of the ancient Near East and [in particular, early on] acquired a structure similar to that of Egypt.?

Evidently, this transnational property of wisdom was taken completely for granted in the halls of power and domestically throughout the region. That is, no one questioned it in principle. (Even the prophets did not object to it in principle. What they objected to were the unjust policies of the wise.) In fact, the wisdom way was such an accepted fact of international politics that even devoutly religious believers in Yahweh could serve with clear consciences in ?pagan? governments, whose rulers felt completely confident to employ. The person whom Christians call Daniel the prophet immediately comes to mind, as does the person often referred to as ?Ezra the priest.? The Book Daniel, however, appropriately enough, appears in the Hebrew Bible in ?the Writings,? and not, as in the Christian Bible, in ?the Prophets.? And Daniel himself, although a devout Jew, was educated to become a statesman in the Babylonian wisdom tradition, where he graduated with top honors and afterward had a long and distinguished political career serving at the highest levels of government within the elite of wise men who advised kings of Babylon. Ezra, though a Jewish priest, also functioned as a Persian diplomat at the end of a long period of Israelite change and reorganization under Persian rule.

It was not just the hakamim, however, who were part of the old-world wisdom tradition. Other classes are too numerous to mention here, but one of these should be described. Close colleagues of the hakamim, the soperim are another prominent group of officials who were indispensable to old-world domestic and international politics. Some soperim appear in the literature as diplomats themselves, but many were political secretaries or professional writers whom English translators of the Hebrew often call scribes.

There is a bit of mischief surrounding that word today, however. ?Scribes? has been reduced ? through popular books and films like The Name of the Rose ? to medieval monks in secluded monasteries leaning over stand-up desks translating or copying old religious manuscripts (good book, though). Although old-world scribes did function in religious contexts, others held careers in government. They were educated to hold political offices, and their curriculum included the specialized training in writing and languages requisite to such a career. Some of them seem to me to have functioned not unlike today's sherpas do, as wordsmiths for our heads of state and their international negotiating teams. I see something of this in role of Ezra, not so much as a priest but in the often overlooked fact that this Israelite was also a prominent soper (scribe) who, as an expert in Mosaic law, represented exiled Israel in the court of the Persian king Artaxerxes. Jerusalem was at this time under Persian rule, and during times of crisis between the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem and their Persian overlords five hundred miles away, Ezra served Artaxerxes as a shuttle diplomat between the Persian capital and Jerusalem.

Referring to a period long before Persian dominance over the region, McKane writes that at the time of Israel's political reorganization under David and Solomon, as international negotiations and agreements with other nations were becoming normative for Israel's kings, a soper ?had to master foreign languages for the purposes of diplomacy, and that in doing so he acquired a knowledge of foreign literatures and assisted in their dissemination.? He finds this similar to Egypt and Babylon, whose soperim served ?in the circle of a high establishment which plays an important role in the political and cultural life of the time [and thus] these scribes have to be distinguished from mere writers. [It] may not be going to far too say ... that these men, although primarily statesmen and administrators, were born middlemen in the international exchange of literature.?

As today, old-world diplomats entertained their counterparts in their own capitals and journeyed on political missions to foreign

capitals. Also today, as then, the wisdom norm of skillful diplomacy can be given free rein, or it can be reined in, often depending on the ideological motivation of an administration, whether that of the Iranian regime, or the White House, or 10 Downing Street. As critics of President Bush's first term (2001-2004) like to point out, the steely refusal of his neoconservative advisors and hard-nosed realists to talk to Iran unless the regime first met certain non-negotiable preconditions was a lose-lose policy, because for Tehran these preconditions were seen as ultimatums.diplomacy and negotiations not reined in by ideological constraints may free the parties to search out the wisdom for easing tensions and reaching agreements

Of course one could ask: What if Bush's neoconservative advisors had entered talks with Tehran? The question then becomes: Given the religious-like authority that neoconservative ideology can hold over its adherents, would such a negotiating team have been a wise course of action? In such a situation it seems doubtful that the wisdom norm of skillful diplomacy would have had much of a chance, given that the talks would have been between the Bush neoconservatives and the ultrafundamentalists of the Iranian government.

This norm at least had a fighting chance during President Clinton's second term (1996-2000), after the surprise landslide election of the reformist politician Seyyed Mohammed Khatami as Iranian president in 1997. Khatami shaped a foreign policy around a remarkable initiative he called ?a dialogue of civilizations,? using it to reach out first regionally to the Arab world, which produced a thaw in Arab-Iranian relations, and then farther afield to Europe and America. This changed the tenor of Iranian politics, and the second Clinton administration sought to capitalize on that. EU-Iranian relations improved, and a number of public speeches and warm comments from Khatami about the United States were reciprocated by Clinton and his secretary of state Madeleine Albright. The signals being sent by both states were noteworthy, as were the practical, if tentative, gestures and initiatives of mutual outreach that followed, even if they indicated only the possibilities of a new beginning.

It was a good start. The wise give-and-take began thawing the bilateral relations. This continued somewhat, albeit not without bickering, for more than a year after 9/11, but with a different administration. Then Secretary of State Colin Powell and his team of advisors at the State Department had succeeded in reaching out to Iran for crucial help in ousting al Qaeda and the Taliban from Afghanistan. As the Bush administration turned its sights to Iraq, however, the neoconservative policymakers (brought into the Bush administration by Vice-President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld) worked incessantly to derail furthering bilateral cooperation, even though that was possible at the time. By May 2003 they had succeeded. Khatami, still president of Iran and hoping to build on the cooperative efforts regarding Afghanistan, had persuaded the regime to take a huge risk. It sent a formal diplomatic letter to the Bush administration seeking the start of direct high-level talks on a wider array of issues crucial to the relationship between both countries, and to multilateral relations in the region, and to the Israeli?Palestinian situation.

The unprecedented offer was immediately rebuffed by Cheney and Rumsfeld. The ultrafundamentalists in Tehran quickly used the snub to undermine the credibility of Khatami, his team, and other reformist politicians, who had been sticking their necks out since 1997 for friendlier relations with the United States. And the rest, as they say, is history, beginning with another surprise election, that of the radical and controversial Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president of Iran in June 2005.

No one has yet convinced me that it is wise for the United States not to talk with Iran. The current situation between the two nations is such that even some diplomatic principles that have been considered inviolable may need to give way to wiser approaches (on both sides). If not, the thinking of each actor may become even less known to the other than it already is, the actions of each less predictable, and the prospect of miscalculation leading to conflict more likely.

On the other hand, as seems to be being practiced at this time by the Obama administration, diplomacy and negotiations not reined in by ideological constraints may free the parties to search out the wisdom for easing tensions and reaching agreements. Two stunning examples from the Middle East, only briefly noted here, are the Israel-Egypt (1979) and the Israel-Jordan (1994) peace treaties. Many political ideologues in Israel and America had been arguing that democracy in the Arab world was a necessary precondition for any normalization of relations between Israel (a democracy) and her (more autocratic) neighbors. Yet Israel managed to conclude peace treaties with Egypt under Sadat, and with Jordan under King Hussein, and these have both withstood perilous times.

The wisdom way involves diplomats, negotiators, and their teams in the exercise of boundless sensitivity to the parties' problems and

great tact and pacing when working toward an agreement. To get the parties to Yes, wisdom helps negotiators submerge their own ideologies to show an evenhandedness for gaining the confidence of all sides. It also helps address what Dennis Ross, in Statecraft, calls the parties' ?comfortable myths,? that they may see reality as it really is and adjust expectations to that, to reach midpoints that both sides can accept.

Wise diplomats, then, are more like dialecticians than apologists or polemicists. Imagine the absurd, if not disastrous, outcomes if foreign ministers met across the table during crises merely to vent political polemics or engage in religious apologetics. Instead, wise diplomats and negotiators on both sides could, I believe, take the toxicity out of U.S.?Iran relations. ?Negotiations are probably the most essential tool of statecraft,? writes Ross. ?Problems or crises can be resolved through negotiations.... Every single instrument of statecraft in one way or another involves negotiations.?

In the diplomatic field, you can't move your counterparts in other nations out just because you have a problem with them. Like professors in a college environment, you're stuck with your fellows, for decades perhaps, in situations where intense conversations continually go on among you about things that cannot keep being shoved aside but which have to be negotiated, even basic ideas about the teaching and the research. This plays a large role in why colleges and universities can and do renew, if not reinvent, themselves over time. If they remain static, if their institutions are non-negotiable, the world moves on, life begins to pass them by.

So, too, in the diplomatic field, which is likewise a long-term environment for intense conversation, but one between nations, where many are the things to think about and many the ways to think about them. For international relations that are stuck in an unacceptable status quo, the wisdom way enables diplomats and negotiators to work together to apply insights and good judgments for wise decisions for new ways ahead. Which brings us to the wisdom norm of mutuality, and its amazing relevance and potential at the rough intersection of the secular and the religious in Western?Middle East relations.

The wisdom norm of human mutuality

The last shall be first. The wisdom norm of human mutuality sheds light on mutual or common ground. Having read this, readers will immediately be reminded of the almost limitless supply of interfaith and multifaith activity that has arisen over the past decade or more. Although the wisdom norm of human mutuality plays a huge role in that field, that subject is for another time. Here, I want us to think about the special agency of mutual cooperation that the norm possesses for human relations and their structures when minding the gap between the religious and the secular. As the British philosopher and theologian John Peck has helped me to understand: wisdom concentrates on interests, concerns, and values that are shared by the human family as a whole before a distinction is made about who is religious and who is not. (Let that sink in.)

I believe that the implications of this are so timely and important for Western?Middle East relations that the wisdom norm of human mutuality may prophetically have been meant for our day, when Western states are trying to determine what role religion should or should not play in their foreign policies vis a vis Muslim Middle East nations trying to determine what role secularism should or should not play in their foreign policies. In recent years, this rough secular/religious intersection has been subjected to increased interest at think tanks and universities, by conferences and authors, and in the halls of power. But it is still so newly arrived to the foreign policy community that it has not been deeply engaged as yet, when compared to the decades of concerted thought that people have given to balance of power, anarchy, state sovereignty, democratic peace, national security, and so on ? areas considered the nuts and bolts of contemporary international politics.wisdom concentrates on interests, concerns, and values that are shared by the human family as a whole before a distinction is made about who is religious and who is not

This religious/secular intersection is one of the main subjects in the book I'm writing, and I want to conclude this essay just by showing what that problematic intersection looks like to the parties and to start a conversation about why the wisdom norm of mutuality can help willing parties negotiate the intersection with less animus toward each other.

On the U.S. side of the gap, the greatest obstacle lies in overcoming two hundred years of what international relations historian Edward Luttwak calls ?secular reductivism?: a philosophical predisposition in capitals such as Washington against including the concerns of any religion in its foreign policy apparatus. That is, a lack of regard for religion per se has been central to the political orthodoxy of modern Western states and of political science scholarship in general. Luttwak roots this in the West's ?Enlightenment prejudice,? which he finds ?amply manifest in the contemporary professional analysis of foreign affairs.? Thus politicians and

journalists (he's writing this before 9/11) often ignored ?the role of religion, religious institutions, and religious motivation in explaining politics and conflict? and focused too much on geographic, economic, social, political, or other non-religious primary causes. For Luttwak, this indicates ?a learned repugnance to contend intellectually with all that is religion or belongs to it.? (?The Missing Dimension,? Edward Luttwak, in Religion, The Missing Dimension of Statecraft, Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson, eds. For a less technical discussion of this problem, see Madeleine Albright's The Mighty and the Almighty, in which the former U.S. secretary of state opens a window on her academic studies in the 1960s, to reveal how her education in world affairs gave her with a strong distaste for anything to do with religion in international relations, and how that attitude was typical of international relations scholarship and influenced Washington's foreign policy decision makers at the time.)

Scott Thomas, an international relations scholar at the University of Bath, has identified several primary contours of modernity that have helped to marginalize valid religious interests and concerns in Western approaches to international politics. Briefly noted here, those contours are: 1) ?Social theory,? which ?helped to explain religion away, rather than to explain its significance in social action.? 2) ?Secularization theory,? which ?argued that the numbers of people who declare themselves to be believers and who regularly attend religious services will steadily decline as a country modernizes,? leading to ?a steady retreat of religion from the pubic square.? 3) The Westphalian presumption, which deemed religion ?to be the ultimate threat to order, civility, and security,? and therefore religion should no longer be part of international politics. 4) The modern scientific method, whose twin controls of naturalism and materialism admit into its theories (including its theories of international politics) only one reality, the physical world. Religion is then seen as a mere epiphenomenon at best, rather than as a basic instinct of human nature. (Scott Thomas, The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations: The Struggle for the Soul of the Twenty-first Century.)

U.S.?Mideast relations of course run both ways. Whereas Washington approaches its international relations from what is thought to be a secular orientation, the capitals of the Muslim Middle East rely on varying degrees of explicit religious belief to inform their politics. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, the powerfully influential network of ultrafundamentalist Wahhabi clerics can be a deciding ?vote? in policies of the Saudi government. In Jordan and Egypt, Islam is the state religion. In Syria, however, it is not, although the Syrian government succumbs at times to religious interests both from within Syria and from Iran.

Lebanon is different still. An Arab country with the largest percentage of Christians by far of any country in the Middle East, Lebanon has a political order unique to the Middle East, designed to accommodate eighteen diverse major and minor religious groups (Christian, Muslim, Druze, and Jewish) who are structurally factored into the government. ?Parliamentary seats, ministries, governments jobs, and so on are apportioned according to these different confessional groups. The political process formally recognizes these religious groups, that each one should have a share in the pie.? (See: journalist Rami Khouri interview by Charles Strohmer on this site.)Whereas Washington approaches its international relations from what is thought to be a secular orientation, the capitals of the Muslim Middle East rely on varying degrees of explicit religious belief to inform their politics

Religious authority may even act as a constitutional arbiter of policy. Iran is a case in point. The contemporary Iranian determinacy between a particular interpretation of Islam and the international politics of the state traces back to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's rise to power in 1979 (when he overthrew the country's American-backed Shah). The constitution drawn up under Khomeini states that Iran is an Islamic Republic whose government must adhere to the teachings of the Quran and the traditions of the sunnah and hadith. Since then, a supreme religious leader (first Khomeini, now Ayatollah Ali Khamenei) has been the absolute political head of the government. ?The legal structure of the Islamic Republic places ultimate political authority in? the supreme leader, who has the final word on all matters of state, including foreign policy. (Azadeh Moaveni, ?Power in the Shadows: Iran's Supreme Religious Leader Keeps a Low Profile,? Time, July 3, 2006.)

Although the supreme leader is Iran's highest political decision maker, he is not elected by the public. He is selected by the assembly of experts and is thought by Iran's ruling clerics to be God's representative on earth. His politics are therefore theocratic, in the sense that he is considered to be directly answerable to God and not as susceptible to public opinion as are Iran's elected president and members of parliament. (Contrast this to a sitting U.S. president, who, although the buck stops with him, is answerable to the people.)

Under the supreme leader is the president and the parliament. A twelve member guardian council, comprised of six jurists and six religious clerics (all of whom must be highly-educated, dedicated Muslims), oversees parliament. The guardian council can, as may the supreme leader, veto any piece of legislation that it deems to violate Islamic laws (shariah) or the Iranian constitution. The council also approves or disqualifies candidates wishing to run for election. One of the more alarming ramifications of this for the Western powers has been that the council habitually disqualifies nearly all of the reformist candidates who seek to run for seats in parliament or for the presidency. (Direct censure of the reformists has, as everyone knows, reached such a pitch today that the regime, sanctioned by the supreme leader, now brutally and violently suppresses groups of peaceful demonstrators who continue to dispute Ahmadinejad's reelection as president in June 2009.)

Countries of the Muslim Middle East, then, face the equal opposite problem to that of the United States. Because their governments are allied with religious interests ? in varying degrees and capacities, and with differing interpretations of Islam ? they must contend from a religious point of view with how their relations should, or should not, develop with a nation, the United States, where religious authority is excluded from playing any official role. Very practically, this affects how the different governments of the Muslim Middle East engage with the United States in pressing matters of democracy, economic progress, political checks and balances, equal opportunities for women, the process of globalization, dealing with acts of terrorism, and so on. As different interpreters of Islam vie for political clout over such issues in the Muslim Middle East, that affects how the U.S. and the other Western states interact with those countries.

The protean religious and political alchemy of the Muslim Middle East, then, plays a role in why each Western state does not have the same foreign policy for each Muslim state, and vice versa. Nevertheless, what unites these Middle East countries is their struggle with America's secular political reductivism, not to mention that of the other Western states.

It's quite a dilemma, this international tug of war between ?the secular? and ?the religious.? It may indeed need the wisdom of Solomon to resolve. I hold the view that trying to wrest one side into the other's camp is a futile exercise at best and at worst moves the world closer to a clash of civilizations. I would kindly like to suggest to all parties, and to the different domestic populations those parties are meant serve and represent, that wisdom stands silhouetted at the rough secular/religious intersection where your two worlds meet. There, now, today, she offers both religious and secular actors a way to begin a new narrative together by getting around absolutized ideological interests and building international agreements on the mutual ground that we all share simply but profoundly because we are all, whoever we are, whatever we believe, human beings.

The wisdom norm of mutuality helps us to be more conscious of and attentive to the interests and concerns of daily life that all peoples everywhere, regardless of race, religion, or politics, or lack of a religion or a politics, hold in common. It may be hard for us, at first, to give sustained thought and action to this today, in an age in which we have been conditioned by ideological reasoning since childhood to accept as normative that cooperative arrangements can be constructed only around adherence to one cluster or another of sectarian interests. Since time immemorial, however, everyone on the planet has shared the same world (what other world is there?) and the same resources. Everyone has participated in the same creation, shared the common bond of what it means to be human, had the same basic interests.

We all want to be able to provide for our families, to see our children raised properly and safely, to live as peaceably as possible with our neighbors, to see our social environments improve, to find ways to ease the suffering of others, to increase possibilities for well-being in the world, and so on. People everywhere have a fundamental interest in such things regardless of their religion or their political affiliation, or whether they claim neither. Believers and atheists alike are moved at the sight of starving children or families left homeless by a tragedy, and both will want to do what they can to alleviate such suffering. In fact, this is precisely where many religious groups focus their efforts. Religious callings throughout history have concentrated on caring for people as they are, wherever they are, and regardless of their beliefs. The same can be said about secular relief organizations.the wisdom norm of human mutuality does not require people to ditch their religious or secular foundations before more cooperative arrangements with each other can be established

The bulk of wisdom literature, in fact, focuses on the concerns and practicalities of everyday life ? work and wealth, family and neighbors, economics and politics, relationships and communication, kings and the administration of justice, prosperity and

suffering, happiness and grief, social life and the law court, and so on ? and the decisions people make about them in their relationships with others in these fields. Today, such issues and concerns are often bracketed as ?secular life,? and according to the Hebrew wisdom literature the choices people make in that life make them wise or foolish. The wisdom way seeks to enable human flourishing in secular life across and cultures, between and among peoples who are different.

Further, the wisdom norm of human mutuality does not require people to ditch their religious or secular foundations before more cooperative arrangements with each other can be established (provided those foundations are not built on or around violence). Religious conversions are not the purpose or function of foreign policy. Instead, wisdom cries in international relations for people who are different to look up from the foreground of particularities about race, religion, ethnicity, or nationality to see the horizons that are possible through architectures of shared human interests and concerns. The wisdom norm of mutuality, to use a Christian expression, seems to emphasize cooperative possibilities based on who people are, more than on what by the grace of God they may become.

To approach this from another direction, wisdom does not require the parties to try to find issues and concerns that have no relevance to secular or religious belief before they can reach agreements. This is why I usually favor the word mutual over the word common. The phrase ?common ground? sometimes carries the idea that there are issues of life that are belief-neutral, issues which neither the secular nor the religious person brings his or her beliefs to; whereas the phrase ?mutual ground? somewhat more emphasizes that all of life is shared by all of us. It's a way to point out a subtle, but I think a significant, distinction. That is, the mutuality norm is not saying, ?Hey, look, here's a bit of neutral ground where we might be able to meet and agree.? Instead, the wisdom way gives us freedom to engage on issues fully as who we are.

Belief is not divorced from negotiations. We look around the table and we see: he's secular; I'm not; she's a Christian; he's a Muslim. The depths of who we are, whether religious or secular, are part of what is talking place around the table in any issue we represent for our countries. Neutral ground unaffected by belief is in fact one of the greatest myths of our time. The wisdom norm of mutuality does not preclude depth of identity.

The norm, however, is not naive. The wisdom way, as noted earlier, is realistic. At those places, then, where having different identities means disagreements will persist, the wisdom way offers a freedom that adherence to ideological stands may not. It enables diplomats, negotiators, mediators, and others not to have mere tolerance of another's view but a respect of the other in such a way that non-negotiable differences may yield ?fruitful forms of virtuous rivalry? (this phrase is from Nicholas Adams, Academic Director of the Cambridge Interfaith Program).

The wisdom way, then, gives national leaders and their policy advisors a way of reasoning about human difference ? right here, right now, in the current states' system ? that is different from the political or religious ideology they may be accustomed to. It is a way of reasoning, however, that gets pretty short shrift in contemporary international relations and foreign policy making. With the voice of wisdom muted by the amped-up sectarian ideologies of our time, its revival today would provide a reasonable and responsible way to re-energize, reshape, and redirect Western?Middle East relations. In this, wisdom is of course realistic about the future. She is not a utopian dreamer. On the other hand, she would ask how wise was the ideological direction of the first decade of the twenty-first century that promised to further international mutual good.

When considering dealing with today's international crises, James Skillen, senior fellow of the Center for Public Justice, writes in With or Against the World that of all of life's certainties, ?one in particular has proven very durable over the centuries, namely, that there is but one world.? Thus the ?American people need to gain a deeper understanding of what it means that the world's people and states share a single global commons, the governance of which is becoming more and more difficult with each passing year.... American failure to think and act cooperatively over the long term for the international common good is part of what threatens even America's future.?

Because the wisdom way is not subordinated to any particular theoretical understanding of life or set of abstract principles or laws, its norms provide both religious and secular political actors with a freedom to search out, together, prospects for constructing and sustaining cooperative international relations based on mutual interests and concerns sans ideological restrictions. It offers this

freedom in a way that can be reasonably and responsibly accepted by all who do not have violence in their hearts. It opens doors for both Western nations and those of the Muslim Middle East to participate not just in reversing adversarial relationships and improving existing relationships but to help the international community toward human flourishing.

This is the special agency of wisdom as she cries amidst our cries for us to build on the unity we have around the everyday interests, concerns, and values of this world that we all share before a distinction is made about who is religious and who is secular. This is her forte because, if the literature is to be believed, she predates religion. For she was there at the beginning. The Hebrew wisdom literature, for one, asserts her presence at creation, her mediating role in its design and in the way it was made effective, and her special delight in our world and its race.

War, a rueful change-agent, is a narrow, wretched, and deceptive means for arriving at the kind of social, economic, and political life most Westerners and peoples of the Middle East would like to see achieved with each other. The war about Iraq has made this, if not anything else, clear. Instead of a war, wisdom provides paths of peace.

As noted earlier, wisdom is not an end. It is a way, a non-ideological way, to justice, peace, cooperation. Not perfect justice, or perfect peace, or perfect cooperation. No, not in this world, where we must learn to accept imperfect international agreements and arrangements. Nevertheless, she stands crying in the street and in the halls of power, awaiting our decision. Right here, right now.

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