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Foreword

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Foreword

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Behind every face . . . there was a human story and indeed more than one; there was life, again more than one, and there were hopes and aspirations, fears and anger, hatred and pain. It would have been naive to assume that my negotiating counterparts were operating as if without feelings.

—Gabrielle Rifkind and Giandomenico Picco, *The Fog of Peace*

When President Anwar Sadat addressed the Israeli Knesset in 1977, he spoke about a psychological war between Arabs and Israelis and said that the psychological barriers constituted 70 percent of all problems existing between the two sides. What did he mean? The ability to resolve conflict is addressed predominantly through the prism of politics and its power relationships, but this approach seldom deals with why people behave in particular ways. Sadat was saying that historical fears, traumas, and humiliations prevent any kind of rational judgment, even if they are in the interest of all parties. He understood that only by connecting at an emotional level, where the fears and insecurities of all the different parties are addressed, can bold political decisions be taken.

I have spent the past twenty years working in conflict resolution in the Middle East; despite my humble contribution, I have continued to witness pain and suffering and scarce examples of reduced conflict. My route from a comfortable therapy room in North London to Riyadh, Tehran, Damascus, Pyongyang, and more is not the conventional trajectory of a psychotherapist's career. Combining the world of psychotherapy and geopolitics has led me to work on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Iran nuclear issue, and the proxy war in Syria. In my early travels, whether I was sitting with the Israelis, the Palestinians, or the Iranians, I believed that getting into the mind of the other, and the insights gained from doing so, should have been a primary tool of conflict resolution but that this tool was insufficiently used in the world of geopolitics.

I founded Oxford Process to address these psychological aspects of peacemaking and to put together the geopolitical with human motivation and in an effort to understand why people behave in particular ways. War is as much about the psychological as it is about realpolitik: there is a need to recognize how the past shapes the present, how trauma influences the way we see the world, and how marginalization, humiliation, and powerlessness negatively affect our ability to resolve conflict. We have much evidence of the links between humiliation and violence, and why marginalized communities finally resort to violence. When people are excluded from access to power and resources, they seek ways to express themselves through the politics of resistance, the politics of revolt, or the politics of violence.

In these conditions, when so much damage has been done, the parties in the conflict are often incapable of developing empathy and understanding the traumatic experience of the other party. For this reason, Oxford Process developed a methodology for managing radical differences that recognizes that conflict parties often have been traumatized by war. In the first phase, a safe space needs to be created for the conflicting groups, where they are separated from their enemies. It is important that they be allowed to express emotions that have built up as a result of war, and we provide an atmosphere conducive to the venting of some of these feelings. With compassion and firmness, the mediator, who is trained in human understanding,

will help the parties recognize the pain of their experience and see how this pain may be blurring any future vision to resolve the conflict. Oxford Process retreat at Cats Alley, Oxfordshire, provides that space.

Our aim is to have protagonists separate their emotions, evoked by the heat of war, from their strategic interests. We begin by working with the parties to help them become aware of how their emotions shape their decisions. What makes this method different from traditional mediation is that this recognition of the traumatic impact of war by all parties is part of the preparation for compromise and peacemaking. Addressing this trauma should be the first step in any peace process. This preparatory work lays the groundwork for parties to recognize the limitations of reconciling different points of view.

Conflict parties do not share a common vision of the future. This statement may appear to be describing a hopeless situation, but it is not. Effective mediation, which these articles stress, is less about the unrealistic search for common ground and more about establishing areas of mutual self-interest. Defining the differences is an important part of the process, and within this process areas of mutual self-interest emerge that allow protagonists to further engage with each other.

The following questions will need to be addressed as part of any strategic calculation: Will another round of conflict be in the parties' best interest? Is violence or nonviolence the most effective way to bring an end to the conflict? Will leaders coming to the peace table be seen as sell-outs by their own communities who have killed and been killed for their cause? By engaging with these difficult questions, we can identify and sustainably implement mutually beneficial outcomes.

Most of the articles in this issue of the *New England Journal of Public Policy* have their origins in a roundtable Oxford Process convened in June 2019 on the psychological dimensions of peacemaking and a follow-up roundtable in September 2019. The participants of these roundtables explored the psychological challenges in peacemaking and looked at the practicalities of creating spaces to better prepare the parties around the peace table. The two sessions provided opportunities to build a community of practitioners to share knowledge and begin to develop a collaborative resource for practitioners in the field.

These articles highlight how the tools of psychology can be used to deepen our understanding of how and why people behave in particular, and often destructive, ways, and what would bring them to the table to work constructively toward peace. Conflict is more likely to be resolved when geopolitical complexities are examined in terms of human relationships. Groups that are suffering from humiliation, powerlessness, and marginalization are more likely to resort to violence, while groups that are treated with dignity and respect and given access to resources and influence over their lives are more likely to display constructive behavior that leads to finding solutions in a conflict environment.

On the psychopolitical level, it is necessary to understand the states of mind of the conflictual parties and the third parties involved in the process, including mediators. Mediators will benefit from a heightened sense of self-awareness, which includes recognizing that their own egos, if not properly managed, can impede progress. There is a potential for a whole constellation of psychological processes to play out in any peacemaking effort. Peacemakers, for example, can be subject to pride, vanity, and arrogance; they can find themselves competing for primacy in the peacemaking process.

Societies recovering from war can also be driven by rational thinking as they undertake institution building, provide security, write constitutions, and create systems of democratic accountability. But though these are all essential components of peace, they ignore how conflict and violence have affected people's psychic states, where fear, anger, betrayal, and resentment reside.

War makes monsters of people. Continual exposure to its violence hardens the heart and calcifies the mind. Suffering turns to anger and alienation. Ethnic or religious differences that were not discernible before war are exacerbated, and ordinary citizens who had previously lived comfortably side-by-side become enemies. Human behavior deteriorates to the extent that many become trapped in a desire for retribution, a desire to make the other side suffer. They lose their humanity, and their capacity for empathy becomes buried.

These psychological dynamics are seldom recognized. Thus, when attempts were made to work on reconciliation in Iraq, Western governments called for power sharing without understanding that many of those caught in deep and brutal conflicts have been traumatized, that their experiences have been deeply damaging bodily, spiritually, emotionally, and psychologically and that many are unable to elevate their internal states of mind to working together. Power sharing might have been more effective if some of the traumatic consequences had been recognized, and if people had been trained to work together in the context of the earlier violence. As Roy Licklider asks, “How can you work together, politically and economically, with the people who killed your parents, your children, your friends or lovers? On the surface, it seems impossible, even grotesque.”¹

Those who have been exposed to the horrors of war may have become frozen in a psychotic state of mind and thus lack the flexibility to express the compassion required to understand the other. If leaders were committed to a political process that seriously addresses the state of mind of those around the peace table, then work could be done to better prepare people to work together to make some of the difficult compromises required of peacemaking. Unfortunately, we see little acknowledgment of the need to attend to the states of mind of the conflict parties.

The authors in this issue of the journal bring the richness of their own experiences and make an important contribution to the development of the relationship between geopolitics and the human mind. If we were committed to understanding and working with people’s states of mind as part of resolving conflict, we might be able to create a psychological preparedness that makes the peace process more effective. Politicians understand power, but they seldom understand psychological processes; and if this publication achieves only one thing and opens their minds to the importance of putting the two together, then it has been a worthy endeavor.

Note

¹ Roy Licklider, *Stopping the Killing: How Civil Wars End* (New York: New York University Press, 1993).