"SIEGE MENTALITY IN ISRAEL": FACT, FICTION OR WHAT? DISCUSSION OF BAR-TAL & ANTEBI

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In their mansucript titled "siege mentality in Israel" Bar-Tal & Antebi propose an intriguing set of arguments regarding the role that "siege mentality" plays in shaping Israeli social and political life. I find the concept "siege mentality" a valuable addition to the discusssion of social representations in general, and to the understanding of Israeli society in particular. In the following sections I shall first attempt to delineate the theoretical utility of this concept and then move to discuss its limitations, especially as applicable to BarTal & Antebi's analysis of Israeli society.

Societies and groups in conflict tend to adopt a clear distinction between themeselves and the world that surrounds them. This principle has received theoretical treatement in the context of group decision making by Janis (1972) and his colleagues who tell us that during times of stress cohesive groups tend to see the world in a "we" vs. "them" perspective. This tendency is associated with a specific set of beliefs that the opposing out-groups are "evil", "stupid" and ill meaning towards one's own group. Similar phenomena have been noted and discussed in the classic studies by Sherif (1966). Inducing a competition between groups seems to engender more hostile attitudes towards the competing out-group.

The concept of "siege mentality" belongs to a family of discussions in social psychology on conflict and its effects on the group's "world view" (Brown, 1988). But it moves beyond this discussions in three important ways. *First,* this concept applies some of the phenomena observed in the small group literature to the larger social, cultural and political spheres of social life. *Second,* the concept of "siege mentality" focuses on one important slice of the negative beliefs held by members of a social group in conflict: The belief that others are hostile towards one's own group. *Third* "siege mentality" reflects a belief that *all* other out-groups, and not only the adversary, share this hostility towards one's own group. Theoretically, this last point seems more central than others. It differentiates the concept of "siege mentality" from relevant past discussions on the attitudes and beliefs held by groups in conflict. Bar-Tal & Antebi's concept introduces a different perspective. It deals with the way in which conflict shapes the group's attitudes and beliefs about *the external world in qeneral.* This may lead the way to new avenues in understanding inter-group and international conflicts and their dynamics. Given this theoretical promise, I was somewhat disspointed that the authors did not develop it in more detail, but chose instead to present a detailed analysis of Israelis views of Arabs' attitudes and intentions towards them.

In applying the concept of "siege mentality" to the Arab-Israeli conflict, the authors seem to agree with the late president Sadaat who had once stated that :"90% of the conflict in the Middle-East is psychological". BarTal & Antebi pinpoint Israeli mistrust and suspicions of their neighbors (i.e., 'siege mentality") as the Israeli part in this "90% solution". Although mistrust and suspicions of Arabs are undoubtedly major players in the Israeli psyche, this

analysis raises some important questions that are unattended to in the present paper. Some of these questions pertain to the theoretical status of the concept "siege mentality", while others are more intimately related to the application of this concept to the understanding of social representations in Israel as stumbling blocks on the road to peace in the Middle East.

Actual or Psychological Realities of Conflict: Implications for "Siege Mentality"

Inter-group and international conflict, are grounded in both actual and psychological realities. The origin of such conflicts is often traceable to disagreements over tangible resources. In many international conflicts, as in the Arab-Israeli conflict, the two sides have incompatible claims over land and natural resources (e.g., water). As the conflict progresses and becomes 'institutionalized', this "actual reality" of conflict creates a psychological reality. The conflicting parties develop a set of beliefs about each other, and social representations which are relevant to their view of the conflict and its solution. This psychological reality contains beliefs about others' intentions towards one's group, stereotyps about others' stable characteristics, and their behavioral intentions towards one's group. Although both the "actual" and the "psychologial" realities play a role in the conflict and its resolution, emphasizing one or the other has important consequneces. The proponents of the "actual" basis of conflict would advocate its resolution by investing efforts to deal with with the real issues under contention. The policy recommendations emenating from such a position call for a laborious and lengthy process of negotiation attempting to overcome the hurdles on the road to reconciliation. Moreover, the implication here is that the "psychological aspects" of the conflict will change when a partial or complete resolution of the real issues is achieved.

The second approach which views inter-group and international conflict as driven by the forces of "psycholoigcal reality" calls for different steps. This outlook holds that the prime obstacles on the road to solution are the elements of mistrust and suspicion of the two sides to the conflict. Here resolution efforts start with more or less dramatic actions designed to alter the prevailing psychological reality. Although as noted previously these two approaches are not mutually exclusive, the different emphases imply different political actions. In the Middle East we have seen both approaches at work. Sadaat's bold trip to Jerusalem epitomizes the conviction that changing "psychological reality" should come before attempts to solve the real aspects of the conflict begin. The current laborious negotiations between Israelis and Arabs which strarted in Oct. 1991 in Madrid, represent a different emphasis. Here, efforts are focused at trying to resolve the real disputes over resources which separate the parties to the conflict.

As already noted, these two alternative routes to conflict resolution are not mutually exclusive. Thus, reports have been made that before Sadaat's trip to Jerusalem, agreement had been achieved on some substantive issues. In a similar fahsion, the very fact that the current meetings between the disputants are held is likely to effect psychological reality. But the emphasis epitomized by each of these two approaches to conflict resolution is nonetheless markedly different.

In light of these two possible perspectives of international conflict, I would like to return to Bar-Tal & Antebi's notion of "siege mentality". The use of this concept as a prime factor influencing the course of the Arab-Israeli conflict tips the balance in favor of the "psychological" side of the scale. The choice of the term "menatality" amplifies this emphasis. Framing suspicion and mistrust which accompany conflicting relationships as

"siege mentality" gives it a *current and autonomous* existence which is divorced from the "real" facts associated with the conflict. One implication of this is that, at least on the Israeli side, altering this "mentality" is the king's road to resolution.

Being a social psychologist such an emphasis compliments my professional ego. Yet, I believe that this represents an over emphasis. Regardless of political convictions, one thing stands out very clearly: The conflict between Jews and Arabes in the Middle East, and more specifically between Israelis and Palestinians, is a dispute over real and tangible resources. It consists of opposite claims on a given stretch of land. Although lessening mistrust and suspicion are integral part of any conflict resolution, the competing claims over resources are still the crux of the matter in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

This "over psychologizing" of the Israeli side of the conflict is apparent in a number of sections throughout the paper. To illustrate, in their conclusion the authors acknowledge the impact of external and real events (e.g., wars; peace confrerences) on the Israeli psyche. Yet, they maintain that the driving force behind Israelis' attitudes and behaviors in this conflict is the "siege mentality". The implied conclusion from this outlook is that Israelis fear the monsters that have long ago perished. But this portrayal ignores the beasts that still roam the Mid-Eastern deserts. Sadaam Hussein's unprovoked missile attacks, the Palestinians' identification with his causes, the rising tide of Islamic fundamantalism, the flag-bruning processesions in which the Israeli flag is always a major star and the terrorist and military threats are all there as part of objective daily realities. Under these conditions it would be only logical to be "...as less dependent on the world community as possible..." (p.61). Such an effort towards independence is better understood in terms of coping with existing real and potential threats than as a consequence of a "siege mentality". Framing the "...development of excellent intelligence institutions, military and aviation industries, or atomic capability..." (p.61) as part of a "mentality" gives it the aura of illogical quixotic behavioral patterns. As far as the case of Israel in the Middle-East is concerned this is simply not true.

Thus, although historical events seem to result in a cuatious and guarded attitude of Israeli Jews towards the world in general, and their Arab neighbors in particluar, viewing these as a "siege mentality" ignores some basic realities of the Arab-Israeli conflict. This "over psychologizing" may distort the picture.

"Siege Mentality": Its Dominance in Israeli Society and the Evidence wich Supports It

The evidence that the authors bring to support their view of the pervasiveness of the "siege mentality" in Israeli society, are assorted quatations from literary works, statements by political and military leaders, and press reports. Such a presentation nicely demonstrates the point, but it falls short of actually supporting the claim. Although, a number of Israeli authors have expressed themselves in ways consistent with the quatations on page 10, there are others who have written about Arabs and their relationships with Jews in a more benign manner. Also, for any song that has been written in the spirit of "siege mentality" there are a number of songs and poems that center on peaceful co-existence and idylic relationships between Jews and Arabs. The same holds for movies and speeches made by political and military leaders.

What is lacking in the present analysis is a move beyond the level of examples. Apart from the brief mention of Arian's (1989) quantitative study which measured a related concept, there are no data to indicate that the authors' claims about the prevalence of the

"siege mentality" in Israeli society is a valid one. Based on the evidence presented in this paper, I believe that statements like: "Indeed, Israeli Jews view the nations of the world as evil, immoral, utilitarian, indifferent and often brutal" (p.58), are unwarranted. Such statements portray Israeli society as a xenophobic culture. This portrayal is not consistent with the fact that Israel is an open society that is constantly affected by the values of the rest of the Western world. Although some of the points made here are intriguing and thought provoking, they lose much of their impact when supported by selective examples and make in absolute statements.

The reader who is not familiar with Israeli society could conclude that "siege mentality" is the major social representation in Israel. I tend to disagree with the generality of such a position. Although this is certainly true of a substantial segment of the Israeli society it does not represent the whole picture. Israeli society is far from being monolithic or dominated by one social representation. In fact, the Israeli social and ideological scene could better be described as being in internal debate over some of the issues which the authors present as having been already decided. It is true that some politicians in Israel make a cynic use of the bitter memories in Jewish history. Yet, other opinion leaders draw more humanistic conclusions from the same chapters in history. In all, it seems to me that "siege mentality" is indeed an important motive in the Israeli culture. But, it is far from being the only or the dominant motive. Israel nowadays is in midst of internal, democratic and intense struggle between opposite sets of values and representations. The values and beliefs associated with "Siege mentality" represent one of the value systems that are being debated.

The over emphasis on "siege mentality" as a driving force in current Israeli social life leads to statements that are too far reaching and general. Thus for example, the authors suggest that "The basic mistrust causes an adoption of hawkish political opinions which prescribe a continuation of the occupation of the conquered territories...". I find this, and similar statements, as disturbing for a number of reasons. First, election results tell us repeatedly that at least half of the Isreali Jewish population does not adopt such a position. Also, a number of public opinion polls tell us that the percentages of those willing to give up at leat part of the occupied land is higher than 60%. In the same line, a substantial majority of the Israeli public is willing to abide by decisions that will be made by the legitimate leadership, even if these decisions mean a return of a substantial proportion of the occupied territories (Elihu Katz, personal communication). Alos, the portrayal of "siege mentality" as an autonomous and central social representation suggests that it is relatively resilient and unchangable. This does not concur with recent historical developments. To cite one example, the ease with which Sadaat's visit to Jerusalem changed prevailing attitudes of animosity and suspicion, attests to the great sensitivity of the Israeli public to actual and real external events. Finally, if security concerns reflect fears of real dangers, then "siege mentality" can hardly be conceived as a parsimonous explanation for whatever level of hawkish positions exist in Israel today.

"Siege Mentality": Concluding Remarks and Future Directions

In all, the paper's emphasis on the Israelis' mistrust and suspicion of their Arab neighbors is a valid presentation of one aspect of Israeli social life. Yet, the major question concerns the framing of this phenomenon. If one chooses to frame it within the concept of "siege mentality" the implication is that an autonmous social representation which is relatively divorced from daily realities is the parsimonious explanation for this state of affairs. I tend to disagree with such a position. Although these factors play a role in Israeli politics and

cultural life, the dominating factor explaining their existence are real events that fall on a fertile historical background. I believe that the presentation of the authors' ideas would benefit from such an approach. It is one thing to say that "siege mentality" dominates the social scene, and another to say that historical events have created a "preparedness" and enhanced sensitivity to external threats.

Beyond these implications for the specific case of the Israeli society the gneneral concept of "siege mentality" presents an important opportunity for theoretical development. It implies that groups and societies under a prolonged "siege" develop a set of social representations that include their perceptions of the adversary groups *and* the world in general. Future research and theory could go into specifying the conditions under which such a "siege mentality" develops, specify its components and related attitudinal and behavioral implications. The ways in which "siege mentatlity" is different from generalized feelings of mistrust aimed towards an adversary group need to be considered. Thus for example one implication of this concept is that the group's social identity is so closely linked to the role of "being hated and persecuted" that abandoning it runs the danger of destablizing one's social identity. Finally, such a theoretical discussion needs to attend to issues of measurement of "siege mentality".

I am confident that the authors have given their attention elsewhere to these and other relevant issues. I was dismayed that these general theoretical considerations have not received a fuller exposure in this paper. This is particularly so in light of the potential importance of "siege mentality" for a better understanding of inter group and inter nation conflict and their resolution.

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