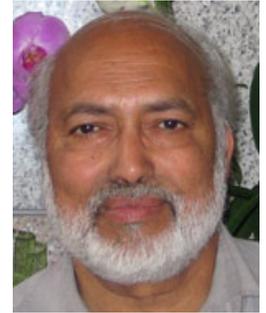


Path to peace **Iftekhar Hai**

FOR centuries, war has been a lucrative business for every civilization and religion — wars for accumulation of wealth, power and territory, often perpetuated under absolute power of monarchy or dictatorship.

These totalitarian systems have slowly begun to give way to democracies, but the democratic system still needs to have some bugs removed. Allowing every person a say in choosing a leader works well in an atmosphere free of danger, corruption or intimidation; but a population under siege from a more powerful neighbor needs more time for democracy to take root and solidify the foundation for a progressive society.



In the aftermath of the Palestinian elections, Israel and America are debating whether Hamas, with its militant past, can become a sincere partner of peace. The good news is that the democratic process has brought Hamas out into the open. They are at the negotiating table, out from the dark allies of war, fear and hopelessness. I now wish for Israel to be forgiving, not forgetting of the past, willing to sow seeds of reconciliation for the good of all the people in the Middle East.

The United Muslims of America Interfaith Alliance has come up with the following statement:

- 1) We urge Hamas to recognize the State of Israel as homeland for the Jewish people and begin peaceful negotiations, so that final borders between Israel and Palestine can be mutually agreed upon.
- 2) We urge Hamas to renounce violence and embrace negotiations as the means to settling disputes.
- 3) We urge Israel, the most powerful military country in the Middle East, to honor democracy and negotiate with Palestinian representatives, Hamas or otherwise. Israel can create history by being the beacon of hope for the Palestinians.
- 4) We urge Israel, as a neighbor, to open up trade and commerce, so that the ravaged lives of the Palestinian people can be rebuilt.
- 5) Each government should set up projects to improve communications between the Palestinians and the Israelis. This people-to-people contact is essential for democracy to flower.

6) Finally, we urge Israel to not withhold funds that are so essential for the day to day functioning of the Palestinians.

Cartoon Controversy

I would also like to comment on the global anger over the offensive cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed, originally published in a Danish newspaper last fall and reprinted all over the world last week.

Personally, I strongly condemn the violence that has erupted, these cartoons are inflammatory and venomous to the world's 1.3 billion Muslims. They touch on the raw emotions of the masses. Does freedom of the press mean no limitations on decency, religious tolerance and sensitivity? Is it Kosher to hit below the belt, and cause unrest, pain and suffering, and take cover under freedom-of-speech statutes?

Diversity is part of life. One may not like it, but one has to respect it.

Coretta King Legacy

In the words of Martin Luther King Jr., whose widow, Coretta Scott King, was laid to rest Tuesday, "He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it. He who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it."

We can all defeat one of the faces of evil — injustice — democratically and peacefully.

Iftekhar Hai, a South City resident is president of the United Muslims of America Interfaith Alliance. He and three other local columnists take turns writing for Faith. Next week: Rev. James Garcia.