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# The Middle East is destroying my friendships

**Yasmin Alibhai-Brown**

I am walking barefoot on broken glass and eggshells with this column. I know well enough how it will displease belligerent Zionists and those Muslims who hate Jews. Others too, probably, because these days, there is a preference for crude and simplistic postures à la George Bush. We all have to declare who we are for (absolutely), otherwise we are presumed to be the enemy. Just as the world becomes maddeningly complex, political and religious fundamentalists jostle for conscripts - people who will surrender their brains and their hearts to follow their leaders. Some of us have, thus far, resisted this call of the sirens. We have, in small ways, crossed boundaries, entered the minds of "others", and found a deeper understanding of our common bonds and obligations to each other. The challenge of this century is surely how to care about people who lie beyond our fields of concern, people to whom we owe nothing or even people who have long been our foes.

Which reminds me. The papers should have blazoned this piece of news but didn't, so low is our esteem for such activities. This Thursday, a British woman, Dr Priscilla Elworthy of the Oxford Research Group, was awarded the Niwano Peace Prize - £100,000 - for her work on the resolution of conflicts through non-violent means. She brings together Chinese generals with Russian weapons designers, Pakistani and Indian warmakers, and today has radical plans on unseating Saddam to which Tony Blair should pay attention. There is nothing weak-livered about wanting to find non-violent, humane slip roads to tackle the most intractable problems. It is a damn sight harder than pure, simple loathing.

For some years now I have been a member of a small group that brings together Muslim, Jewish, Asian and black Britons. We meet every six weeks and talk openly, often painfully, about all the issues that divide us and which we know we can affect if we work better together. And we have. We have helped refugee doctors to get retraining, and helped to make sure that the Stephen Lawrence inquiry was not left to gather dust. Two Jewish members have personally funded and participated in projects to prove that Islamophobia is getting worse. (How many Muslims have openly campaigned against the anti-Semitism that we all know is freely traded in mosques and other places?) This is not interfaith dialogue, because we have atheists too

among us. Politicians, ministers too, have been invited for meetings, and sometimes even more controversial people - representatives of the Nation of Islam, for example.

This is the place where I feel best understood and safe. I know that if I ever need help or support outside my own family, these are the people who will stand by me. The majority of them, at present, are Jewish, because some non-Jewish people have gone on to jobs that do not allow such informal attachments. But for the first time ever, I am worried that this remarkable group will fragment. The political is pounding the personal so mercilessly these days, I wonder if we can survive.

Our alliances, painstakingly stitched together, are now stretched to breaking point. Trust, which survived the blasts of the many wars in the Middle East, the rise of fanatics - from George Bush and Sharon to the Taliban - and, until now, the pending war against Iraq, is fragile and frail today.

I see a direct connection between what we are threatening to do to Iraq and what we tolerate in Israel. I am becoming aware that this connection worries the Jewish group members. To them, there are other evil regimes, and these human rights abusers get off without a mention. They may have a point. But as one of those Muslims who does not deny the right of Israel to exist (to its pre-1967 borders) and who has always been openly critical of our own societies, it is telling that today the iniquitous actions of Israel are consuming me. They illustrate too blatantly the arrogance of leaders who expect immunity because of the horrors of the Holocaust, the memories of which they betray.

I am not at all sure that my Jewish friends can understand the depths of these feelings. I don't bring them up because our relationships feel too vulnerable suddenly.

As my colleague Justin Huggler wrote in this paper last week, as the world obsesses about Iraq, Sharon is acting ever more like a licensed psychopath. Some 600 or so Israelis have been murdered by Palestinians. That is unequivocally condemned by me. But 2,000 or more Palestinians have been massacred by the overwhelming force of the Israeli army. Palestinians, old and young, are subjected to humiliation, beatings and torture, as was described in unbearable detail by Edward Said in a London lecture this January. We know what we call anti-Jewish prejudices, but what label do we give to the attitudes of some Jews towards

Arabs, all of whom are seen as vermin fit only for extermination? Arabs too are Semites, so what do we call this Jewish hatred for other Semites?

Gaza is under siege and a dozen Palestinians have been killed because they were suspected, yes suspected, of being Hamas activists. Now the US is naming Palestinian academics in the UK and the US, pronouncing them terrorists without any proof. One of the victims of this summary injustice is the academic Bashir Nafi, who lectures at the University of London. His life is suddenly engulfed in suspicion. He may or may not be involved in unsavoury activities. But this is a violation of his rights. Aid agencies have called for our government to send food to the starving people of Gaza, deliberately denied sustenance by a government we do not condemn.

But I do continually question myself in feeling the way I do. Am I becoming more detached (for the first time in my life) from the genuine alarm at what many decent Jewish people see as a creeping anti-Semitism around the world? Is this evil once again uncorked and is it now tolerated because of the dreadful policies of the Israeli government? I think Linda Grant may be right when she points out in an essay in *Prospect* that "Anti-Zionism, while not itself anti-Semitic, if pursued vigorously by enough people, lays the foundations on which it becomes possible to construct a political agenda in which Jews are principally responsible for the world's problems."

Many Jewish people feel uneasy about going on the anti-war marches for this reason, and I understand this reluctance. Who would want to be out there among millions fighting for justice for Iraqi people when all the while placards accuse you of being a force of evil? I think anti-war march organisers should have focused only on Iraq, because that is the absolute priority. But when it comes to public discourse, you cannot have a credible debate about Iraq without direct and intellectually honest comparisons with Israel and other factors too, such as our complicity in keeping double standards for the two countries and the terrifying ambitions of Bush and Richard Perle and Paul Wolfowitz, the enthusiastic pro-war American Jew.

If we, progressive Muslims, Jews, Caribbeans and other anti-racists, can't stand the heat of this, if we fall apart over the way the world seems to us today, then hope must itself have died.

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