The narcissism of minor differences in the psychological gap between opposing nations

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The Narcissism of Minor Differences in the Psychological Gap Between Opposing Nations

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A NY NEGOTIATIONS BETWEEN OPPOSING nations, according to Harold Saunders (1985), occurs in two phases. The first, largely political, is designed to help build political foundations, gain support for leadership, and remove obstacles to the resolution of international problems. The second is chiefly diplomatic and involves actual official negotiations. Davidson and Montville (1980-1981) refer to the preliminary, unofficial dialogues as Track II diplomacy, in order to distinguish them from official negotiations — Track I diplomacy. Some makers of foreign policy view Track II diplomatic talks as "confidence building" or "foundation building."

During the past 15 years I have been present at many unofficial dialogues engaged in by representatives of national groups in conflict. As a member — and later as chairman — of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the American Psychiatric Association, I attended a series of major and minor meetings between Egyptians and Israelis between 1980 and 1984. Throughout this period and earlier, I also participated in a number of semi-academic and semipolitical meetings of Turkish and Greek representatives in Cyprus. As Presi-

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dent of the International Society of Political Psychology, I came to know political scientists, historians, and anthropologists actively involved in foreign policy, some of whom were from time to time active participants in official Track I diplomacy. These experiences have led me to hold, with Mack (1979), that we can formulate certain psychological concepts that are applicable to the building of political foundations between nations.

Jones (1915) observed that "the self becomes more or less identified with one's fellow-citizens and the state is a magnified self" (p. 69). Mack (1983) confirmed this by suggesting that the sense of self, whether that of an individual or of a group, is intertwined with the sense of ethnicity and nationality. Under political stress a group will adhere more stubbornly than ever to its sense of nationality or ethnicity (Volkan, 1979), which becomes increasingly grandiose. It regresses to dehumanizing its enemy before claiming its victims (Sandler with Anna Freud, 1983); historical hurts are handed down from one generation to the next (Rogers, 1979); and the inability to mourn over changes brought about by political forces or by a war becomes a political force for the perpetuation of disagreements between opposing nations. I would add that there is a human need to have enemies as well as allies, and that this need is connected with the developmental processes of childhood (see Volkan, 1985a).

These observations and related findings (Volkan, 1979) led me to conclude that two major principles seem to dominate a preoccupation with the enemy: the first deals paradoxically with ways in which we are like the enemy. There are often realistic reasons for enmity; in addition, it is likely that we unconsciously perceive our enemy as a reservoir of our own unwanted parts and thus dimly acknowledge a fateful connection between us. We must not appear on the conscious level to resemble the enemy too closely, however, since it is necessary for us to believe that what we have externalized and projected upon him is not something of our own.

The second principle, also paradoxical, concerns the distance maintained between a group and its enemy. On a conscious level we find ways to establish and control a distance from the enemy, while on an unconscious one our aggression toward the enemy binds us *to*

him. Thus, both consciously and unconsciously, we become preoccupied with the enemy; in a sense, this makes for a closeness between us.

Each of the opposing parties tries to control the gap, thus in a way maintaining a relationship while making declarations that they are far apart, as in differing ideology. I speak of a "psychological gap" in referring to the distance involved in this second principle. This gap may be seen as a moat filled with preoccupations with certain rituals used to control the ebb and flow of aggression. Such control can be seen on a spectrum; it can either be playful, as in scornful ethnic jokes, or deadly, as in actual combat. I see the narcissism of minor differences as a crucial aspect of what I am describing and as a prototype of the two major principles governing the relations between enemies.

Jonathan Swift satirized obsession with minutiae in his fictional account of the war between the Lilliputians and the Blefuscudians over the proper way to break an egg: "eleven thousand persons have, at several times, suffered death, rather than submit to break their eggs at the smaller end." Swift in 1726 seemed fully aware of how much importance is often attached to minutiae, and that man may kill rather than modify his views and behavior concerning trivial differences.

During the application of Track II diplomacy to official negotiations between opposing nations, it is obviously easy to identify major differences to put on the peace table for rational observation and bargaining. Skilled official negotiators, whether they will admit it or not, pay attention to psychological considerations and acknowledge the value of intuition as well as of experience. They will avoid, for example, making any remarks that might give rise to offense on ethnic or nationalist grounds, for these could quickly poison the atmosphere. However, such remarks or equally hurtful nonverbal communications are sometimes "unintentionally" made.

Let us imagine, for example, a social event involving a Western, a Middle Eastern, and a neutral third party, as an attempt to relax negotiators at a serious international conference. If Western music is played during dinner, followed by music from the Middle East,

should negotiators from the West then leave the room, great of-
fense would be taken. Professional negotiators, especially those in
the neutral, peace-making group, are careful to consider all possi-
bilities in order to prevent embarrassing incidents, but they are
thinking chiefly in this connection of observable (major) differ-
ences; many minor differences, perceptible only to those with inti-
mate knowledge of all concerned might easily escape their atten-
tion, or will be disregarded as not being "real world" issues.

These minor differences are, however, the locus of the most stub-
born and unalterable investment. Certain emotional attitudes at-
tached to what appear to be trivia can become "real world" prob-
lems. I hold that acknowledgment of this fact would be most
beneficial for diplomats or other makers of foreign policy, who
would do well to keep in mind that although individual and group
responses may not seem "realistic," they are deeply connected with
core self-esteem and therefore cannot be ignored.

Freud on the Narcissism of Minor Differences

Freud coined the phrase *narcissism of minor differences* in "The
Taboo of Virginity" (1918, p. 199):

> . . . each individual is separated from others by a "taboo of per-
> sonal isolation", and . . . it is precisely the minor differences in
> people who are otherwise alike that form the basis of feelings of
> strangeness and hostility between them. It would be tempting to
> pursue this idea and to derive from this "narcissism of minor dif-
> ferences" the hostility which in every human relation we see
> fighting successfully against feelings of fellowship and overpow-
> ering the commandment that all men should love one another.

Werman (1983) suggests that the naricissism of minor differences
is "so ubiquitous a phenomenon that it might easily be subsumed
under the rubric of the psychopathology of everyday life," and that
it seems to represent a "muted form of aggression."

It is indeed irritating to haggle with somebody who obstinately in-

flates the value of seemingly trivial points; one senses aggression. But when minor differences are introduced in interethnic relations and/or international negotiations, they present prickly points few are willing to tackle. For on this level the narcissism of minor differences is unquestionably connected with aggression, and, more specifically, with the concept of enemy. Thus the possibilities for peace or war are inextricably bound up in it, whether there is conscious awareness of this factor or not.

In 1930 Freud remarked briefly on the role of the narcissism of minor differences in the international arena. He wrote:

It is clearly not easy for men to give up the satisfaction of this inclination to aggression. They do not feel comfortable without it. . . . It is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestation of their aggressiveness. . . . it is precisely communities with adjoining territories and related to each other in other ways as well, who are engaged in constant feuds and in ridiculing each other — like the Spaniards and the Portuguese, for instance, the North Germans and South Germans, the English and Scotch, and so on. I gave this phenomenon the name of "the narcissism of minor differences," a name which does not do much to explain it. We can now see that it is a convenient and relatively harmless satisfaction of the inclination to aggression, by means of which cohesion between the members of the community is made easier [p. 114].

Mack (1979) thought that Freud's remarks could be used as a stepping stone to the study of the psychology of minor differences in international conflict. What follows is an effort to do just that.

Narcissism of Minor Differences in the International Arena

Cyprus is a splendid laboratory for interethnic studies. A Mediterranean island under Turkish occupation for more than 300 years, it

was first "rented" to the British and then given to them in the first part of this century. It contained two ethnic groups (along with some other very minor ones), the majority Greek and the minority Turkish, living side by side. After a period of terroristic activity by Greek Cypriots aimed at the British, a Cypriot Republic was established in 1960, but the islanders continued to consider themselves either Greek or Turkish, and within three years, conflict broke out between Greek and Turkish Cypriots. In 1974 Turks from the mainland landed on the island in order to protect the Turkish minority. This brought about a *de facto* partition of the island into a Turkish section in the north and a Greek one in the south.

A psychiatrist/psychologist team, James Tenzel and Marvin Gerst, went to Cyprus and studied the island during the turmoil that preceded the events of 1974, when Cypriot Turks were being confined to small areas. They concluded that each of the two groups basically saw the other as a "mirror image" of itself. An American policy-maker, citing their works (Tenzel, 1971; Gerst & Tenzel, 1972; Tenzel & Gerst, 1972), reasoned that if each group saw itself as a mirror image of the other, each must be in some sense identical to (or at least similar to) the other. On the basis of this reasoning, the diplomat argued for intervention on the island. He felt that the similarities could be exploited in the interest of peace: political negotiations could stress the shared similarities as structural cornerstones; mass media could instruct the population in their shared heritage; educational facilities could collapse ethnic polarity by presenting a new, homogeneous cultural perspective on the inhabitants of Cyprus. In short, the American felt that peace could be achieved by an appeal to ethnic unity.

It is true that there are undeniably similar ethnic customs among the Turks and Greeks of Cyprus, but there are also major differences — and, what is more important, minor ones — that the diplomat minimized in his effort to focus on similarities and lead to spurious reasoning. This is a common error at the negotiating table. As Tenzel and Gerst themselves observed, minor differences are often the chief sources of major emotional obstacles. They found that both the Greeks and the Turks on the island seemed "to share the

same common cultural reference which magnifies *small areas of difference,* such that they become the main criteria for the establishment of trust or its reciprocal in the relationship between each group" (Gerst & Tenzel, 1972, italics added). They did not further elaborate their understanding of the psychology of minor differences, but I believe that an exploration of this subject will lead us closer to the intricate roots from which interethnic strife grows.

During the British rule in Cyprus, and even into the early months of the Republic, it was customary for the Greeks and Turks to take evening strolls into town. There were favorite spots for promenades — the sidewalks along the open cafes and pastry shops which lined the main streets, for instance — and although the two groups usually congregated according to ethnicity, there were also common areas used by both groups, such as the boardwalks of Larnaca and Kyrenia. To a stranger, the crowd of Greeks and Turks might look like a homogeneous group of Mediterranean people dressed alike and taking a common pleasure in the cool evening air; but to the islander, differences among members of the crowd are obvious and important.

Greeks and Turks can distinguish each other at a glance just by noticing such seemingly insignificant details as different brands of cigarettes. Greeks usually prefer those packaged in blue and white, like the old Players cigarettes, because blue and white are the Greek national colors. Turks smoke brands packaged in red and white, the Turkish colors. In the villages, where usual masculine dress consists of baggy trousers and shirts, the Greeks wear black sashes, the Turks red. In "normal times" a breach of this color code might be tolerated, but when ethnic relations are strained, when group cohesion (and therefore individual integrity) is threatened, a Turk would rather die than wear a black sash, and a Greek would be just as adamant in his refusal to wear a red one.

Color that has psychological implications can be seen in other countries too. In Northern Ireland, Catholic villages distinguish themselves from the Protestant ones by a subtle color code to which every member of the village adheres; Catholics paint their front doors and gates green, Protestants paint theirs blue. There is no di-

rect correspondence between the two colors and the two religions; the colors are simply unalterable minor differences that separate the two groups and that each group preserves under the influence of tradition.

Similar preoccupation with minor differences aside from color can be seen anywhere in the world, especially where the atmosphere is politically stressful. Under the pressure of political strife in India minor differences become important, for example, in the neighboring West Coast states of Gujarat and Maharashtra, which before 1960 had composed a single large state until civil unrest forced their separation. Although both states are predominantly Hindu, each has its own distinct, though not unrelated, language and customs. Women in both states wear saris, but Garati women wear the shoulder section of their saris on the right, whereas Marathi women wear it on the left.

In 1984, after the bombing of the Sikh mosque, many Sikhs — even those who lived well outside the realm of protection afforded by Sikh communities — revived certain customs which they had abandoned during less threatening times. This generally took the form of men allowing the beards they had shaved to grow back, and once again wearing the turbans they had given up for less conspicuous manner of dress. Physical danger became less important than the urge to symbolically reactivate and exhibit a Sikh identity. The general effort seemed to resonate on a very deep community level. A Sikh friend of mine who lives in America and has been thoroughly Americanized grew a beard and donned a turban shortly after the troubles in India. He then had his photograph taken, and sent it to his relatives in India as a representation of the sense of reaffirmation and recommitment he was feeling for the Sikh community. This new pose seemed unrealistic to me; I suspect it was psychologically motivated, that my friend used it as a way to heal the injury he felt he had suffered when the community in his motherland was injured.

A subtle example of the role of minor differences is provided by Stein (1984), who observes that certain boundaries originally necessitated by religious conflicts later become absorbed into ethno-

nationalist strife as religion becomes part of the content of ethno-
nationalist conflict. Stein reports that the conflict between Latin-
Rite and Byzantine-Rite Catholics in America became focused on
minor points of departure from the rituals of religious observance.
Where Byzantine Catholics crossed themselves over the chest from
right to left and carried pussywillows on Palm Sunday, Latin Cath-
olics made the sign of the cross from left to right and carried palm
leaves on Palm Sunday. However minor these divergences might
seem from a non-Catholic perspective, they represented potent
areas of dispute in Europe between Catholics in Mediterranean
Europe and Catholics in Eastern Europe. In America, these differ-
ences took on additional importance for the Byzantines who were
involved in differentiating themselves in the American melting pot
of nationalities, and for the Latin Catholics who were experiencing
the pressures of assimilation-acculturation. In short, the inflation
of what were originally minor religious differences occurred when
they became part of an ethnonationalist conflict. Russians and Slo-
vaks, in Europe and America, distinguished themselves by an al-
most symbolic observance of nonessential details of ritual.

The Meaning of Narcissism of Minor Differences

My formulation (1985a,b) of the *suitable targets of externaliza-
tion* makes it possible to understand how the narcissism of minor
differences relates to derivatives of the aggressive drive. First, a
brief review of the concept of suitable targets of externalization:
Fornari (1966) suggested that an individual's first enemy is someone
strange to the eight-month-old child and whose appearance awak-
ens anxiety (Spitz, 1950), although this person may in fact be a fam-
ily friend or relative. The anxiety such a "stranger" causes is *not*
confirmed by the reaction of caretakers, since the enemy, in a politi-
cal and social sense, is shared by members of a group, we need to
look for another developmental phenomenon (other than the stran-
ger anxiety) to observe the beginning of the concept of the enemy.
Kernberg (1966, 1976), following Jacobson and Mahler, empha-

sized in his now widely known theory of internalized object rela-
tions that ego and superego consist of self and object representa-
tions that reflect the original relationship between a child and its
objects. There is a tendency to invest with libido self and object
units formed under the influence of pleasurable experience, creat-
ing "good" self and object images; similarly, images formed under
the influence of unpleasurable experience are invested with aggres-
sion, and "bad" self and object units result.

According to Kernberg, by the time the child is three he will com-
plete uniting his opposing differentiated good and bad object repre-
sentations, along with the opposing drive derivatives attached to
them, so they become better tamed. Thus he may achieve an inte-
grated self-concept, integrated object representations, and more
neutralized expression of the drives. It is my belief (1985a,b) that
this integration — which I like to call mending — as well as the repres-
sion of the "unmended" units, is never completed, so it is possible
for object relations conflict to continue. The child, as he develops,
tries to deal with the persistence of such conflicts, ideally getting
considerable help from interaction with his mothering person, who
helps him select suitable *durable* targets of externalization. Such
targets are at first certain inanimate objects in his environment into
which he puts for safekeeping some of his unmended good and bad
self and object units.

As long as these externalizations prove useful, the likelihood that
the child will keep unmended (especially bad) units inside is re-
duced, and he can "protect" himself against future object relations
conflicts, as well as use the protection provided for him by his
increasing ability to repress. Moreover, these externalizations help
the child attain a more cohesive self representation and more con-
sistent internalized object representations. Familiar food and the
customary ways and sounds of the household and (later) the neigh-
borhood in which he lives make suitable good targets upon which
the child can externalize aspects of himself. Such reservoirs given to
the child are shared by many — or all — mothers or mothering per-
sons in any given group, and constitute the building blocks to which
the children of the group will cling to some degree throughout life in

the construction and affirmation of what belongs to their ethnic, cultural, national, or religious identity. Similarly, "important others," such as the mother, make the child feel that certain things "out there" are suitable, durable containers for his unmended bad self and object images. When kept inside, unmended bad units threaten the integrity of the self, but when put "out there" at a safe distance, and when used for comparison with good units kept inside, they can enhance the sense of self. Such "bad" suitable targets contain the precursors of *the concept of an enemy* shared by the group.

Shared targets tie the children of a group together; at the pre-oedipal phase in their development it is these targets that serve as a bridge between individual and group psychology. By using them, the individual finds himself supported by the group. In Cyprus, a Turkish historical monument becomes a good target for a Turkish child as he grows up, whereas a Greek Orthodox church is a bad one.

Condensation of unmended good self and object images with the idealized self and object images further heightens the child's investment in the suitable targets of externalization. When the mending of opposing self and object images takes place, the child experiences a sense of "loss" of his good ones, and in response to this he establishes idealized images of his parents and himself. These idealized images are not "absolutely" good like the original all good self and object images, but they are still held in the highest regard. Some coalesce in the maturing superego, taming its ferocity, but idealized images join unmended good ones in being externalized into suitable targets of externalization. For example, for a Finnish child a sauna may come to include the soothing, warm image of the idealized mother. In a similar process, bad suitable targets of externalization, precursors of the concept of the enemy, contain devalued aspects of the parents.

As the child passes through adolescence, he reexamines his childhood targets of externalization, finds new ones, and strengthens his investment in some while withdrawing it from others. I have examined elsewhere (1985a) how suitable targets of externalization be-

come crystallized during "the adolescent passage" (Blos, 1979) and thereafter. I have described how the meaning attached to inanimate targets becomes abstracted and internalized by a process that starts in childhood and is marked in adolescence. In other words, it is not only the ethnic soup that consoles the child; in time the ethnicity of nationality speaks for itself. Some material targets, such as a flag, persist over a lifetime. Furthermore, during adolescence the child enlarges his world, and the concept of enemy is further crystallized by sharing common ideation within the peer group. Throughout adult life, even if the person is exposed to different experiences in group relationship, he continues consciously or unconsciously to invest his ethnicity and nationality with deeply felt emotion. Under stress, a feeling of ethnicity or nationality is sometimes not enough to confirm one's strengthening sense of belonging to a group and thereby to fortify the sense of the self; the group may then revert to a childish way of setting up inanimate targets to share with others of the group in order to repair injury to the sense of individual and group identity.

Palestinians in Gaza exemplify this phenomenon when they wear secret talismans bearing a picture of Palestinian heroes or meaning-ful abstract symbols to assuage their injured feelings and to bolster their sense of self. It seems not enough for Palestinians in the Gaza Strip simply to be aware of their Arab identity; they must cling, however secretly, to certain inanimate objects in order to maintain their self-esteem by joining the invisible network of all Palestinians.

Erikson (1966) uses the term *pseudospecies* in referring to man-kind's diversity. He suggests that primitive man in all his naked vul-nerability took on the protective armor of lower animals, donning their skins and coming to have a distinct sense of identity and fearing those humans who belonged to another subspecies. To this sensible surmise, through the concept of suitable targets of exter-nalization, I add the notion that each human child as he develops becomes prone to the need of having certain specific others as ene-mies, while at the same time linking himself to his own pseudospe-cies. I suggest that the need of an individual to have enemies and al-lies begins with his developmental externalization of his unmended

bad and good self and object representations (later condensed with projected *unwanted impulses and thoughts*), and with those reservoirs of attitude derived from the mothering person and shared with those of his kind.

To return to the phenomenon of narcissism of minor differences: it seems logical that the best reservoir for our bad externalized parts, originally our own, would be located in things and people who *resemble* us or are at least familiar to us — such as neighbors. As Freud said, the Spanish and Portugese make suitable targets for each other, as do Cypriot Turks and Cypriot Greeks. When neighbors live in peace, they absorb similar wanted parts, and then both perceive some other "neighbor" to be an enemy. But when the neighbor is our enemy, and is tinged with our unwanted parts, we do not wish to acknowledge on a conscious level that the enemy is like us. So we focus on minor differences, or we create them, in order to strengthen the psychological gap between the enemy and ourselves. The strengthening of the psychological gap is unconsciously obligatory since it serves as a buffer to keep a group's unwanted parts, impulses, and thoughts — which originally belonged to it — from coming back into the group's self. Therefore, while the differences themselves may be minor, the psychological role they play is major. This is why a group has a need to create and to protect these differences, and, as I have noted, to die for them in highly charged situations.

Further Examination of the Psychological Gap

The study of the psychology of minor differences among enemy groups is relatively simple when the enemies are neighbors or when their similarities are readily apparent. The study becomes more difficult when the enemies are not neighbors and when the enemy groups or nations seem more dissimilar than similar, e.g., in language, religion, and customs. We must therefore turn our focus from simple, easily identified minor differences, such as the importance attached by neighboring Greeks and Turks to red and black

sashes, to a closer examination of the psychological gap between enemy groups. The psychological gap is a sort of envelope that contains several phenomena, including that of minor differences. It may be studied according to the same psychology by which we study minor differences.

When a group becomes our enemy we become obsessed with it, and familiarize ourselves with it, more often according to the dictates of our unconscious processes than to those of reality. The preoccupation seems even more compelling than our preoccupation with our allies. The psychological gap between the enemies contains rituals that titrate aggression as it binds them together, and in them the narcissism of minor differences is evident.

As long as the rituals and ritualistic postures that serve to separate groups are playful, they function positively to keep derivatives of aggression under control. But if the tension between the competitive groups increases, the playfulness of rituals in the psychological gap decreases qualitatively. For instance, we recently saw a deterioration in the quality of playfulness in the Olympics, when first the United States and then the Soviet Union used the Games as a forum for the overt expression of political tension. Prior to this erosion of competitive spirit, the Olympics had provided all participating nations with access to ritualized competition in which wins and losses did not entail killing.

As a group becomes preoccupied with an enemy, its already existing image is modified and becomes an even more suitable reservoir for the externalized self and object images and the projected thoughts and impulses of the threatened group. The threatened group contaminates the enemy group with its own negative mirror image. It is then compelled to widen the psychological gap between the two in an effort to gain the safety of an intervening psychological distance.

In circumstances of economic or political stress the enemy group is perceived more and more in stereotypical terms — even when it obviously does not lend itself to rigid negative stereotypes or when its positive attributes might just as easily be noted. And the more we unconsciously recognize its resemblance to our own and make it a

reservoir of our unwanted and unacceptable characteristics, what Stein (1982) calls "adversary symbiosis" results.

> . . . the term "symbiosis" is here used in more than a descriptive or metaphorically evocative sense. It refers to the way in which the adversaries experience one another, governed by projection and dissociation. Each needs its opposite member to complete itself: this is the nature of the ghoulishly complementary "division of labor." The two opposites are in fact inseparable, inextricable from the other. Together they constitute a system, a "dual unity" (Mahler et al., 1975), based on labile self/other boundaries and attendant inside/outside distortion [p. 56].

With the development of an adversary symbiosis new material is needed to fill in the gap for the dual role — distancing the enemy on one level, bonding it on another. Such benign rituals as comparing national costumes or dances in international competition no longer satisfy. The new material may be highly intellectualized, as in the development of new nationalistic political theory. MccGwire (1984), for example, describing the beginning of "the deterrence theory(ies)" in this country which were aimed at keeping the Soviets from using nuclear weapons against us or our allies, writes that no Sovietologists of standing were directly involved in the strategic debates at the beginning of the 1950s, but that certain assumptions were nonetheless made about Soviet aggression.

> The field developed a breed of self-styled, "tough-minded" strategic analysts who liked to think through problems abstractly and in a political vacuum. To this new breed, the opponent was not "Soviet man," not even "political man," but an abstraction called "strategic man," who thought, as he did, in game-theoretical terms. This assumption provided the intellectual justification for a form of worst-case analysis, which was impressive in its quantitative trappings but had only limited relevance to the real world [p. 751].

We may use action as ritual in addition to what we have intellectualized. War games and the like indicate that peaceful rituals have

given way to something more malignant. In the end, war breaks out directly between the major opposing groups, or, in a displaced way, indirectly between smaller nations or ethnic groups that are the puppets of larger ones.

Our current knowledge of human nature tells us that enemies are here to stay. In practical aspects of negotiation one should not assume a world in which all nations are the same and no differences exist in international understanding. To do so would be Utopian. Negotiators should therefore not try to ignore minor differences between nations, but attempt to deal with them. The rituals in the psychological gap between nations are arrayed over a spectrum. It is up to the negotiators, particularly those who represent a neutral country, to act as catalysts in replacing malignant rituals with benign ones and thus to help resolve the destructive inclinations of conflicted ethnic and national groups.

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