

The Next Cold War

TO THE EDITORS:

Amid America's troubled war in Iraq, Israel's frustrations in confronting Hezbollah and Hamas, and Iran's blustery belligerence, David Hazony ("The Next Cold War," *AZURE* 28, Spring 2007) is right to sound the alarms and exhort the West to remain firm in its struggle against Islamic extremism. But his analysis is marred by dangerous hyperbole, prompting him to violate his own admonition that what the West most needs today is *conceptual strategic clarity*.

Hazony commits four intellectual errors in trying to make the case that "a new Cold War is upon us" and that today's threat is tantamount to that posed by the Soviet bloc. First, he exaggerates the material and ideological threat posed by Islamic extremism. To be sure, Islamic extremists have plenty of financial backers and access to the weapons and explosives that they need to ply their trade. But they do not have the backing of a major industrialized state nor the vast conventional and nuclear capabilities maintained by the Warsaw Pact.

On the contrary, Islamic extremists prey on weakness and disaffection.

They set up shop primarily in weak and failing states that are unable to establish effective control over their territory. Furthermore, their ranks and geopolitical footprint are miniscule compared to the communist bloc, which reached from Central Europe to East Asia and had proxies and allies in virtually every quarter of the globe. Extremist cells may be operating on a global basis, but comparing them to the Soviet Union is only to accord them the inflated status that they seek, but hardly deserve.

Second, Hazony is mistaken to claim that the disparate groups that have taken up the cause of Islamic extremism "have begun to work together with a unity of purpose reminiscent of the Soviet [Union]." Anything but. The Islamist movement lacks centralized coordination and is far from ideologically unified. Fueled by the sectarian violence in Iraq and Iran's bid for regional hegemony, the cleavage between Shi'ites and Sunnis is growing. Tehran's hardliners and al-Qaida's leaders are rivals, not co-conspirators. And the divisions are not just along sectarian lines. In al-Anbar province in Iraq, Sunni tribesmen are now taking up arms against their Sunni brethren in al-Qaida.

To portray the Islamists as unified is more than an academic mistake. One of the important tools the West has at its disposal is exploiting and indeed fostering divisions within the extremists' ranks. To assume the enemy is monolithic would be to overlook a key weapon in the West's arsenal.

Third, Hazony overstates Iran's power and sway when he contends that the country is "the approximate counterpart of the Soviet Union." Iran's material capability and political reach are paltry when compared to the Soviet Union's. The government in Tehran is unquestionably abhorrent, but that's one of the main reasons that Iran is today so isolated diplomatically. And, as Hazony acknowledges, the regime is hardly on stable ground. It faces "economic stagnation and ideological disaffection," two weaknesses "which could ultimately spell its downfall." But Hazony illogically twists this accurate assessment, contending that "it is precisely because of the Ayatollahs' apparent frailty that the West has failed to notice the similarities between this menace and the Soviet one a generation ago." The West has failed to notice these similarities because there are none.

Finally, in his zealous effort to convince the West to man the barricades and put "relentless pressure" on Iran, Hazony misconstrues the nature of the strategy that enabled the West

to prevail during the Cold War. To be sure, coercive pressure—escalating the arms race, imposing trade sanctions, forming a network of military alliances—played a vital role in the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union. But so did engagement. Negotiations over arms control and other policy issues, cultural and educational exchanges, and the flow of information helped undermine the ideological foundation of the Soviet regime. Exploiting splits within the communist world was also critical, with President Richard Nixon's successful opening to China a turning point in the trajectory of the Cold War.

In similar fashion, the West needs to exhibit unstinting resolve to prevail against the forces of Islamic extremism. But as during the Cold War, what's required is a mix of coercive pressure and deft engagement, not ideological and strategic excess. Hazony is right to call for conceptual clarity. But such clarity requires nuance and balance, not exaggerated claims that the West is now in a new Cold War. The Bush administration's disastrous war in Iraq has made all too clear the consequences and costs of strategic mythmaking and threat inflation.

Charles A. Kupchan
Council on Foreign Relations
Washington, D.C.

DAVID HAZONY RESPONDS:

Charles Kupchan cites “four intellectual errors” responsible for bringing me to “dangerous hyperbole” in my conclusion that the threat facing the West today has parallels, both in its nature and its solution, to the Cold War. But in his first and third arguments, to the effect that both Islamic extremism and Iran itself are much weaker than the Soviet Union was, he falls into the classic trap of refusing to address smaller threats before they become big ones—in other words, he would have us wait to fight the next cold war until the menace became as powerful as the Soviet Union was. I never said that Iran is anywhere near that strong, but that the *logic* of the Iranian regime, and the vast efforts it is making to acquire allies around the world, nuclear weapons, a huge standing army, the sympathies of ideological compatriots, and proxy forces fighting the West on multiple fronts, all in the name of a totalitarian ideology and at great cost to its own economy—that all these mean that Iran will continue to pursue its conflict with America and its allies, and will continue to grow in strength, until it meets with determined opposition from the West. To this Kupchan has no answer.

His second argument is that the Islamic world is deeply fractured, with Sunnis and Shi’ites fighting one

another. Again, even if he were right, the argument would still come down to the suggestion that because our enemies are weak and ill-coordinated, they should not be seen as an enemy. But he is wrong, at least in the way that counts most. Of course the Islamic world is riven throughout with religious and ethnic rivalries. But it is always dangerous to assume that dueling anti-Western forces can be played against one another to help the West. This was the logic of the Oslo accords, which assumed that Yasser Arafat’s PLO would, given the right inducements, prefer to fight Hamas and Islamic Jihad rather than Israel. In fact, what happened was the reverse: Arafat allowed these groups to flourish, because his true support base would never see him betray any Palestinian group in favor of the infidel. So we should not be surprised, for example, that Shi’ite, Persian Iran has become a patron for Sunni Arab insurgents in Iraq and for the Palestinian territories—because all are fighting against Western powers. However, where an Arab regime is perceived as being too Western—in Lebanon, for example—there we have Arab Shi’ites in the south preferring loyalty to non-Arab Iran, which fights the West, over their own Lebanese brothers to the north, who do not. In all cases, it is the West which is understood to be the true

enemy, an enmity which overrides internecine hatreds.

Finally, Kupchan argues that the Cold War was won not just through clarity, but also through “nuance and balance.” Fair enough. But the “engagement” undertaken by Reagan, such as the summit in Reykjavik in 1986, was of a very different sort from that of his predecessors. There talks were the handmaiden of clarity; through them, the Soviet leadership finally came to understand the degree of American determination, pushing it along the road to collapse. Can anyone say that about recent efforts to “engage” Iran?

Circumcision

TO THE EDITORS:

Ido Hevroni, in “Circumcision as Rebellion” (*AZURE* 28, Spring 2007), proposes a connection between R. Akiva’s insistence upon the rite of circumcision and his belief in free will over determinism. This is an extraordinarily fanciful assertion. Surely, the matter may be understood more simply: R. Yose, like Josephus Flavius, saw the futility of openly challenging the authority of Rome by pursuing prohibited practices, circumcision among them. These two men were

not alone in having seen enough to know that Rome was fully capable of putting down any form of resistance. In other words, the issue was not free will versus determinism, for the Judeans were obviously free to rebel. The dispute among the Judeans themselves was, rather, *whether* to rebel, or even to resist passively through the continuation of practices outlawed by Rome. Those opposed to resisting Roman authority believed that such a tactic would end only in still more destruction of Judean lives and property, which proved to be correct—witness the failed Bar Kochba Revolt in the second century C.E. This was not, then, a philosophical position on the debate between free will and determinism. It was a cold assessment of the likelihood of success in any future revolt.

Furthermore, it is important to note that after the disastrous results of the Bar Kochba Revolt, the Jewish leadership decided to adopt a peaceful approach toward Rome, and to discourage any future attempts at warfare by the Judeans. R. Yehuda Hanasi, the most influential rabbi of his generation, may have spearheaded this approach, possibly through direct contact with one or two of the Antonines, Marcus Aurelius or Septimius Severus. His acceptance of the futility of armed

resistance depended not upon any belief in determinism, but rather on his realistic assessment of the likely outcome of further revolt against imperial Rome. When viewed this way, the ability to exercise freedom is never in question. The question is *how best* to exercise one's freedom for the sake of survival.

Indeed, the rabbis of that time were, for the most part, survivalists. The prophets, too, in an earlier period of our history, might be considered survivalists. A case in point is the prophet Jeremiah, who expressed his opposition to his people's military struggle against the Babylonians in the sixth century B.C.E., on the grounds that continued battle would only lead to greater destruction for his people. Jeremiah was not a determinist, but a survivalist. Similarly, in the war against Rome in the first century C.E., there were those in Jerusalem who wanted to surrender in order to prevent more loss of life. They, like Jeremiah, were deemed traitors, and many were killed by fellow Judeans, the so-called Zealots. But again, the issue was not between those professing free will or determinism, but between idealists and survivalists. The idealists would continue to fight to the last man. The survivalists, by contrast, believed that saving human lives was more important.

Finally, Hevroni attributes a rather grandiose symbolic meaning to circumcision, namely, the willingness to improve things that are found in their natural state through the exercise of free will. This, despite those who say it cannot or should not be done, a position he interprets as determinism. Limited space prevents me from expounding on the frequently unwise use of our natural resources for "higher" purposes, such as the clear-cutting of our rain forests. Suffice it to say that there are some aspects of nature that are better left without "improvement."

Whether the adversary be Rome, the Church, or any other oppressor, circumcision was a symbol of defiance against attempts to eradicate Judaism. Today, however, it no longer has that meaning. Therefore, it can no longer serve as the powerful symbol of Jewish identity and survival it once did. In short, in a democratic and pluralistic society such as our own, the issue of Jewish survival and Jewish identity is far too complex for any single rite, circumcision included, to hold so unique a place in the Jewish psyche.

Rabbi Yeshua Charles Familant
Menlo Park, California

TO THE EDITORS:

In his article "Circumcision as Rebellion," Ido Hevroni interprets

the Midrash (Tanhuma, Tazria 7) in which an argument is described between R. Akiva and the Roman governor Tineius Rufus, the subject of which is the commandment to circumcise. R. Akiva illustrates for Tineius Rufus that sometimes the products of civilization may be better for humanity than the natural product before human intervention: Bread is better than wheat, and clothes are better than flax. So too it can be a good thing to alter the natural state of a person—after all, we cut the umbilical cord. This is the Midrash's position in relation to circumcision: God gave us the commandments, and they serve as a rule to purify, and to refine, as the goldsmith purifies his gold.

Hevroni takes up this line of thought when he states that “circumcision cannot be conclusively dismissed as an act of damage.” However, this physiological-medical position is unreasonable, and Hevroni mentions it only in passing. His justification for circumcision is brought only toward the end of the article:

This view takes on symbolic application with the severance of the foreskin, the marking of the most impulsive organ of the human body with an open and blunt statement: Man is not an animal. Man shares with God the ability to stand outside of and apart from nature. Man is a creation whose horizon of aspirations lies far beyond the satisfaction of his natural

impulses. Man wants to change, even to create, the world.

There is no basis for this symbolic interpretation in the Midrash, where circumcision is an act that improves the natural state; this is evident by its comparison with cutting the umbilical cord. Circumcision for Hevroni, on the other hand, takes on a symbolic significance, and thus he cannot find support in it for his position.

Hevroni thus did well in abandoning the Midrash. Had he granted circumcision the actual power of inhibiting libido, as did Maimonides and others, one might conclude about the Jews that on account of circumcision they are more restrained and less lustful than uncircumcised non-Jews. This not only is incorrect, it is also chauvinism of the worst kind.

Let us be honest, however, about the sources of circumcision and its nature: Circumcision was not bequeathed to the ancient Hebrews as God's commandment. Rather, it was adopted by them (with a few changes) from the Egyptians. This was pointed out already by Herodotus, in the fifth century B.C.E. We do not know with certainty its ultimate source, but it is clear that it was not performed for any health benefits. On the contrary, the chances of infection and other complications following the surgery were high, as we learn from

technologically undeveloped societies where circumcision is practiced today. It is likely that circumcision is rooted in superstition, mixed with sexual complexes, which have always existed in human society.

We shall do well to remember what is at stake in this discussion. We are not bickering about the correct explanation of some talmudic Midrash or another: The subject is the cutting of a newborn's penis. All attempts to justify a custom such as this by means of one or another symbolic explanation collapse in the presence of the baby, in agony under the *mohel's* knife.

If it is so important for Hevroni to affirm that the horizon of his aspirations lies far beyond the satisfaction of his natural impulses, let him affirm it as much as he likes, but without cutting babies. Perhaps he feels called upon to defend Judaism from a trend recently spreading in Israel, that of not circumcising babies. Maybe Hevroni is afraid lest Judaism be weakened on account of this. Yet I hope that over time he should change his mind and come to think, with me, that there is enough of worth in Judaism to guarantee its survival, even after it rids itself of this disturbing custom. It may even be strengthened this way.

Hanoch Ben-Yami

Central European University
Budapest

TO THE EDITORS:

Ido Hevroni's paean to circumcision hinges on a fallacious premise: That the normal genitals of a newborn male require or will benefit from what he calls "repair." From that unsupportable position he draws grandiose conclusions about "the correct relationship between man and his world."

Hevroni's perspective on circumcision is limited by his focus on ancient rabbinic sources, to the exclusion of contemporary work on such matters as the anatomy and function of the prepuce, ethical and legal issues connected with nonessential surgery on persons who can neither consent nor resist, the inherent sexism of a rite celebrating not "universalism" but male superiority and dominance, and the meaning of circumcision as a sacrificial blood rite. He seems to have been unprepared even to consider the comments of Maimonides, who recognized quite clearly that, in his words, "if at birth this member has been made to bleed and has had its covering taken away from it, it must indubitably be weakened." No support there for the notion that circumcision is reparative.

All of Hevroni's murky discourse—about "natural man," repairing "that which is deficient," and so on, aims at justifying removal of an essential body part from helpless infants. This

is not a matter for vague speculation about “man and his world” (whatever that supposedly signifies for women); this is about the right of all persons to freedom from any form of physical intrusion or nonessential alteration of

their bodies without their maturely considered consent.

Leonard B. Glick
Hampshire College
Amherst, Massachusetts

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