

New. Clear. Vision. | Deciphering Political Language

Finding Genuine “Peace, Stability, and Security”

by Ahmed Afzaal

(Editor’s Note: This week on NCV, as part of a thematic series, we are featuring articles focusing on the Israel-Palestine conflict and attendant issues, hoping to stimulate a dialogue and suggest potential ways forward.)

For many Americans, the Israeli-Palestinian issue has become an unfathomable mystery enveloped in a dense fog of confusion. In order to clear some of the fog, I would like to enlist the help of a particular expert. The person I have in mind is George Orwell (1903-1950), the English author and journalist best known for his dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1948).

Why should we make Orwell our guide? One reason for choosing Orwell is that his writings offer one of the most enduring lessons for democratic citizenship, a lesson that many of us are in the process of forgetting. Orwell would tell us that an attitude of *suspicion* towards those in power, especially the politicians and the news media, is nothing short of a civic virtue. The citizens’ refusal to take the claims of the powerful at face value is a sign that democracy is alive and well.

But the main reason for choosing Orwell is the expertise he has in recognizing the deceptive potential of language. If “eternal vigilance” is indeed the price of liberty, Orwell would insist that nothing needs more vigilance than the *language* that politicians speak. In his famous essay “Politics and the English Language” (1946), Orwell argues that modern political language is “largely the defense of the indefensible,” for it is meant primarily to “make lies sound truthful and murder respectable.” Since it aims at masking the truth and/or making it palatable, political language consists “largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness.”

The language used by the news media to “cover” the Israeli-Palestinian issue is essentially the same language that American and Israeli politicians use to frame this issue. By decoding this language, we can clear the fog of confusion surrounding this issue. As an illustration, I propose to decipher a political text with Orwell’s help — the speech delivered by the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on May 24, 2011, before a joint session of the US Congress.

Based on the frequency with which it appears, no word is more important in this text than “peace.” Even though he uses “peace” 52 times, Netanyahu never defines it — thereby suggesting that his implied definition of “peace” is identical to that of his audience. Exercising the virtue of suspicion, however, we ought to question this assumption. Orwell reminds us that certain buzzwords with positive connotations are often used in a “consciously dishonest way.” Basically, he says, “the person who uses them has his own private definition, but allows his hearer to think he means something quite different.” This, as we shall see, is the case with Netanyahu’s use of the word “peace.” While most English speakers would say that “peace” denotes an absence of organized violence, Netanyahu has “his own private definition.”

Early in the speech, the Israeli Prime Minister made the following statement: “We [Israel and the United States] stand together to advance peace.” Notice how this statement *brackets* Israel and the United States, thereby uniting the speaker and his audience in their rhetorical commitment to “peace” — an unquestionably *positive* goal. In addition, this claim presupposes a consensus between the two countries on the definition of “peace.” This consensus, in turn, implies that Israel has been trying to “advance peace” with its neighbors, particularly the Palestinians, in precisely the same sense in which the United States has been trying to “advance peace” throughout the world. Given that the United States has the most powerful military in the world and that Israel enjoys the same status in the Middle East, and given that both countries have repeatedly employed their military might, Netanyahu cannot possibly be using the word “peace” to denote an *absence* of organized violence. For him, the concept behind the word “peace” is something that appears to be perfectly *compatible* with organized violence.

In his essay cited above, Orwell says that many political buzzwords are actually euphemisms that are used to



imply, but not communicate, the exact *opposite* of what they are supposed to mean. It turns out that “peace” is one of these euphemisms. Orwell writes: “Defenseless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*.” As a political euphemism, then, the word “peace” has nothing to do with an absence of organized violence. In reality, “peace” denotes a condition that typically results after a massive use of organized violence, usually over an extended period, has eliminated all foreseeable threats to the established (or establishing) authority. This meaning of “peace” has a long pedigree. In the first century CE, Tacitus famously said of the Romans, “To ravage, to slaughter, to usurp under false titles, they call empire; and where they make a desert, they call it peace.” As a more recent example, we may recall that the Israeli military invasion of Galilee in 1982 was called “Operation Peace for Galilee.”

When used as a political euphemism, “peace” is virtually synonymous with “stability.” The word “stability,” in turn, is a euphemism for maintaining the political status quo. Consider the following quote from Netanyahu’s speech: “The peace with Egypt and Jordan has long served as an anchor of stability and peace in the heart of the Middle East.” In this sentence, notice the juxtaposition of “peace” and “stability” as referring to the same general idea. The dictionary says that “stability” denotes the strength to resist change. In a political sense, therefore, the word “stability” implies the capacity of a particular configuration of power relations to persist over time. This definition is consistent with Noam Chomsky’s understanding of what politicians mean when they use the word “stability” — “the maintenance of specific forms of domination and control, and easy access to resources and profits.”

Closely related to “peace” and “stability” is another keyword — “security.” In Netanyahu’s speech, “peace” and “security” are juxtaposed in this statement: “But you know very well that in the Middle East, the only peace that will hold is the peace you can defend. So peace must be anchored in security.” To paraphrase, “security” is what helps maintain “peace,” and since Israel desires “peace,” it must have “security.” For most English speakers, “security” denotes freedom from danger or harm, but this is very different from its political meaning. As a euphemism, “security” denotes two interrelated mechanisms without which “peace” and “stability” cannot be maintained — one for surveillance, in order to detect any signs of opposition or resistance; and another for organized violence, in order to threaten any real or potential rebels into submission, or, if necessary, to exterminate them.

“Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable. -George Orwell



Netanyahu said that his country is willing to accept a Palestinian state, provided its own “security” needs are met: “So it’s therefore vital — absolutely vital — that a Palestinian state be fully demilitarized, and it’s vital — absolutely vital — that Israel maintain a long-term military presence along the Jordan River.” Why such an overt discrimination? How can Netanyahu claim the right to “security” for his own country but completely deny it for its neighbor?

The only way to make sense of Netanyahu’s asymmetrical view of the “security” needs of Israel and Palestine is to recognize that he is speaking on behalf of an unfair and immoral political arrangement. He is trying to do precisely what political language is designed to achieve, i.e., “the defense of the indefensible.” Netanyahu is arguing that the massive disparity of power that currently exists between the Israelis and the Palestinians should be accepted by all parties as a permanent and legitimate arrangement. In this vision, only Israel needs “security” because it has to constantly “defend” this disparity of power against any possibility of change. The Palestinians, on the other hand, must not be given any means of empowerment, for this would only reduce the disparity and therefore disrupt the “stability” of the system.

The question of “security” is closely linked with the concept of “state.” Netanyahu’s use of the word “state” also calls for critical scrutiny. Reminding the audience of a speech he delivered in 2009, Netanyahu said: “Two years ago, I publicly committed to a solution of two states for two peoples — a Palestinian state alongside a Jewish state.” By using the symmetrical phrases “Jewish state” and “Palestinian state” in close proximity, he is giving the impression that his implied definition of “state” is the same in both cases. This, however, is not true.

In the same speech, the Israeli Prime Minister clearly stated that Israel intends to annex most of the occupied territories where it has built Jewish settlements; that Israel will also annex any other areas that it finds useful or attractive; and that Israel will have the final say in determining the borders of the “Palestinian state.” In addition, the Likud Party’s official platform says that Israel will not give up the control of West Bank and East Jerusalem, and that the Palestinians can have their “self-rule” but they cannot have an “independent and sovereign state.” In his 2009 speech, Netanyahu stipulated that the future “Palestinian state” will not be allowed to have a military, enter into military pacts with other countries, or have control of its own airspace

and borders.

When Netanyahu refers to “Jewish state” and “Palestinian state,” he has in mind *two* very different definitions of the word “state.” Netanyahu uses the phrase “Palestinian state” as a euphemism, since it would be politically inconvenient to say what he really means, i.e., a “Palestinian ghetto” or a “slave colony.” The real problem, then, is not so much that the Palestinians are unwilling to accept a “Jewish state,” as Netanyahu wants us to believe, but that the Palestinians are unwilling to accept the Israeli *definition* of a “Palestinian state.”

To conclude, the confusion surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian issue is at least partly the result of a deliberately evasive and dishonest language, used equally by the politicians and the news media. Exercising our democratic duty to be suspicious, and remembering George Orwell’s warnings about political language, it is possible to cut through the fog of confusion and begin to see the issue with increasing clarity.

Ahmed Afzaal, Ph.D., holds his doctorate in Religion and Society from Drew University, and is an assistant professor of Comparative Religion at Concordia College. Dr. Afzaal was born in Pakistan, where he studied science and attended medical school, and is the author of numerous articles on subjects including religion and social change.

Views: