

# **Toward Life-Coherent Peace in the Middle East**

## **Sacred Memory, Structural Violence, and the Protection of the Life-Ground**

What if peace in the Middle East keeps failing because we are asking the wrong question?

For generations, the region has been approached through the language of power, security, territory, retaliation, deterrence, diplomacy, and competing sacred claims.

Again and again, the world asks: Who is right? Who is guilty? Who has the stronger claim? Who must be defeated? Who must concede? Who controls the land? Who has the right to security? Who has the right to return? Who has the right to remember?

But perhaps beneath all of these questions lies a deeper one.

What must be protected, restored, and brought forth so that all affected peoples can live without destroying the life-ground of one another?

This is the question at the heart of *Toward Life-Coherent Peace in the Middle East*.

It is not a peace plan. It is not a legal brief. It is not an attempt to erase history, flatten responsibility, or ask the wounded to forget.

It is a framework for asking better questions in the presence of unbearable injury.

Its central discipline is simple, but demanding:

No wound denied.

No wound enthroned.

Jewish historical trauma must not be denied. Palestinian dispossession must not be denied. Israeli fear must not be denied. Arab and Muslim humiliation must not be denied. Iranian insecurity must not be denied. Christian and minority vulnerability must not be denied. The role of regional authoritarianism, external powers, arms flows, and geopolitical manipulation must not be denied.

But no wound may be enthroned.

No wound may become a sacred license to dominate, erase, humiliate, starve, displace, terrorize, or destroy the conditions of life for another people.

This is where life-coherent peace begins.

Not with amnesia.

Not with revenge.

Not with victory.

But with the protection of life itself.

The Middle East conflict is not merely a geopolitical problem. It is a wounded field of sacred memory, historical trauma, land, law, displacement, fear, grief, resource insecurity, and competing claims to survival.

It is also shaped by external powers, arms industries, religious narratives, energy interests, legal structures, and economic systems that often benefit from permanent emergency.

To approach such a living field only through victory logic is to remain inside the problem.

Victory logic asks: Who will prevail?

It seeks deterrence, territorial control, targeted force, military advantage, narrative victory, and the defeat of the perceived threat.

In victory logic, security is imagined as control.

The other side appears as danger, obstacle, enemy, or permanent threat.

Every wound confirms the need for stronger force. Every attack confirms the righteousness of retaliation. Every humiliation feeds the next eruption. Every security measure becomes the next grievance.

Victory logic can sometimes suppress violence for a time. But in a structurally coupled region, suppression is not the same as peace.

When the viability of one people is destroyed, the consequences do not disappear. They return as trauma, rage, radicalization, despair, and renewed violence.

A living region cannot be treated like a chessboard.

Families, memories, aquifers, hospitals, schools, religious sites, borders, refugees, hostages, prisoners, children, and ecosystems are not pieces to be moved. They are living and life-supporting realities.

A strategy that secures one node by destroying the viability of another destabilizes the whole field.

This is why the framework proposes a shift from victory logic to viability logic.

Viability logic asks a different question.

Not: how do we defeat the threat?

But: what must be protected so that life can continue under conditions of difference?

Viability logic defines security not as domination, but as the preservation and expansion of shared life-capacity.

It asks whether policies, laws, military actions, sacred narratives, and diplomatic agreements protect or destroy the life-ground.

The life-ground is the full set of conditions that make life possible.

Water.

Food.

Air.

Shelter.

Health care.

Sanitation.

Safety.

Ecological viability.

Education.

Mobility.

Law.

Dignity.

Memory.

Participation.

And intergenerational continuity.

When the life-ground is damaged, people may still be alive, but their ability to live, develop, relate, heal, and hope is diminished.

A ceasefire may stop the shooting. But if people still lack clean water, medical care, shelter, dignity, legal protection, mobility, and hope, then violence has not ended. It has changed form.

This is why the life-ground must be the first test of peace.

Not the last.

Not after political settlement.

Not after negotiations.

Not after final-status questions are resolved.

First.

Because human beings cannot deliberate, negotiate, forgive, worship, govern, or repair when the conditions for life are being destroyed.

This is one of the central insights of John McMurtry's life-value ethics: any institution, economy, policy, or security doctrine must be judged by whether it enables or disables life-capacity.

Something has life-value when it helps living beings survive, develop, participate, heal, relate, create, and flourish.

A school has life-value.

Clean water has life-value.

A functioning hospital has life-value.

Truthful memory has life-value.

Justice has life-value.

A ceasefire has life-value when it protects life and opens space for repair.

The question is always:

Does this preserve, restore, or expand life-capacity?

The second foundation comes from Johan Galtung's peace theory.

Galtung taught us that violence is not only direct violence.

Direct violence is visible injury: killing, bombing, torture, rape, hostage-taking, forced displacement, starvation, and physical attack.

It is the violence we usually see first because it has visible victims and immediate horror.

But direct violence often grows from deeper patterns.

Structural violence is harm built into systems.

It occurs when institutions, laws, borders, economies, checkpoints, blockades, occupations, exclusions, or resource arrangements prevent people from accessing what they need to live with dignity.

Structural violence may not look like an explosion.

It may look like a child unable to get medical care.

A farmer unable to reach land.

A family unable to return home.

A community without clean water.

A people without legal protection or political voice.

Structural violence is slower than direct violence, but it is no less real.

Then there is cultural violence.

Cultural violence is the story-system that makes harm appear normal, necessary, righteous, sacred, defensive, rational, or inevitable.

It is the language that says:

They only understand force.

They are all terrorists.

They are all occupiers.

Their children are not like our children.

Their grief is propaganda.

Their lives are collateral.

Cultural violence prepares the mind to accept direct and structural violence.

And once these three forms begin feeding each other, a tragic loop emerges.

Historical trauma feeds sacred narrative.

Sacred narrative justifies structural control.

Structural control produces humiliation and desperation.

Humiliation and desperation generate new direct violence.

New direct violence confirms the original trauma narrative.

The cycle repeats.

This is why traditional ceasefires often fail.

They silence the guns, but leave the structures and stories that regenerate violence untouched.

A life-coherent peace must transform all three: direct violence, structural violence, and cultural violence.

The third foundation comes from Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela.

They help us understand that human beings do not live in facts alone. We live in domains of emotioning and languaging.

Emotioning means the emotional field that makes certain actions and conversations possible.

In a field of fear, compromise may sound like danger.

In a field of humiliation, restraint may feel like surrender.

In a field of rage, even truth may be heard as attack.

Languaging is more than communication. It is the relational process through which human beings bring forth worlds of meaning.

Words do not merely describe reality. They help create the world people live in.

When old words carry old wounds, new possibilities cannot be heard.

This is why peace cannot be imposed from outside as a rational blueprint.

Living systems do not simply obey external instructions.

They change through recurrent interactions that alter their structural coupling while preserving their viability.

Structural coupling means that living systems and their environments shape one another through repeated interaction.

In conflict, peoples are not separate objects. They become co-shaped by one another's fear, violence, memory, policies, and responses.

What one side does changes the conditions under which the other side acts.

This is why domination cannot create lasting security. It shapes the other side into deeper fear, resistance, humiliation, or despair.

The task is not to force reconciliation.

The task is to create conditions in which the other can reappear as legitimate in coexistence.

This does not mean accepting all behavior.

It means distinguishing the living legitimacy of persons and peoples from the illegitimacy of actions that destroy life.

A person or people may be opposed, restrained, prosecuted, negotiated with, protected from, or held accountable.

But they must not be converted into a category of life whose destruction is sacred, necessary, or desirable.

The enemy must cease to be an ontological category.

Nowhere is this more urgent than in the treatment of wounds.

A wound becomes dangerous when it is denied.

It becomes more dangerous when it becomes identity.

It becomes catastrophic when it becomes sacred permission.

The Jewish wound includes exile, persecution, antisemitism, pogroms, the Holocaust, and the fear that no one will protect Jewish life unless Jews possess overwhelming capacity to protect themselves.

This wound cannot be dismissed.

The Palestinian wound includes dispossession, Nakba memory, occupation, exile, refugeehood, statelessness, blockade, settlement expansion, humiliation, and repeated exposure to overwhelming force.

This wound cannot be dismissed.

The Israeli wound includes fear of annihilation, hostage trauma, terror attacks, regional hostility, and the perception that concessions may invite destruction.

This wound cannot be dismissed.

The Arab and Muslim wound includes colonial partition, Western intervention, resource capture, humiliation, Islamophobia, authoritarian manipulation, and the repeated experience of double standards in the international order.

This wound cannot be dismissed.

The Iranian wound includes foreign interference, war, sanctions, encirclement, and insecurity, even as Iranian state strategies may also contribute to proxy violence, regional fear, and repression.

This wound cannot be dismissed, and neither can its harmful expressions be excused.

The discipline is not denial.

It is not equivalence.

It is not sentimental forgiveness.

It is this:

No wound denied.

No wound enthroned.

Wound-sovereignty occurs when a community's suffering becomes an unquestionable authority.

It says:

Because we have suffered, we may do whatever is necessary.

Because we were harmed, our fear must rule.

Because our wound is sacred, another people's life-claims may be suspended.

The life-coherent framework rejects wound-sovereignty.

Every wound must be heard.

No wound may be allowed to justify life-destruction.

This is why legitimate life-needs must be separated from domination strategies.

Security is a legitimate life-need.

Collective punishment is not.

Self-determination is a legitimate life-need.

Annihilationist politics is not.

Sacred belonging is a legitimate life-need.

Sacred exclusion is not.

Accountability is a legitimate life-need.

Revenge is not.

Resistance to oppression may be legitimate.

Deliberate harm to civilians is not.

The task is to protect the need while refusing the domination strategy.

This leads us to the Life-Coherent Peace Protocol.

It has seven movements.

The first movement is to protect the life-ground first.

This means civilian protection, water, food, shelter, sanitation, medical access, energy, hostage release, prisoner due process, humanitarian access, protection of journalists and aid workers, and prevention of famine, epidemic disease, and mass displacement.

This does not solve the conflict.

It prevents the conflict from destroying the conditions under which any solution remains possible.

The second movement is to name all wounds without weaponizing them.

Truth-telling must be plural, disciplined, and asymmetry-aware.

It must allow grief to appear without allowing grief to become a weapon of erasure.

The aim is not competitive victimhood.

The aim is to disclose the wound-field so that hidden drivers of violence become visible.

The third movement is to distinguish life-needs from domination strategies.

Every claim must be asked:

What legitimate life-need is being expressed here?

And then:

Is the proposed strategy protecting that need by disabling the life-ground of others?

If the strategy destroys the life-ground of others, the need must be protected by other means.

The fourth movement is to transform sacred memory into custodial responsibility.

Sacred narratives cannot simply be abolished. They must be transfigured.

A life-coherent sacred memory asks not:

What does our wound entitle us to do?

But:

What does our wound obligate us never to repeat?

For Jewish memory, the Holocaust becomes a universal discipline against dehumanization, not only a national security trauma.

For Palestinian memory, the Nakba becomes a demand for dignity, return, recognition, and repair without requiring the destruction of Jewish life.

For Muslim, Christian, and Jewish sacred geographies, the land becomes a shared trust rather than a possession that proves divine favoritism.

For all traditions, the sacred is tested by whether it protects the vulnerable.

The fifth movement is to build civil-commons peace infrastructure.

The civil commons are the shared institutions and practices that secure access to life goods.

Water systems.

Health systems.

Schools.

Public knowledge.

Legal protection.

Ecological restoration.

Food security.

Trauma healing.

Sacred-site protection.

Participatory governance.

A civil-commons peace is not just a signed agreement.

It is peace built into the systems that people use every day to live.

The sixth movement is to create participatory truth, mourning, and repair processes.

A durable peace needs courts, treaties, and rights.

But it also needs mourning spaces, memory practices, apology, reparations, acknowledgment, and embodied encounters where the humanity of the other can become perceptible again.

Forgiveness without justice becomes spiritual bypass.

Justice without restored relation can become endless punishment.

The life-coherent aim is repair: the restoration of conditions in which life can continue with dignity after irreversible harm.

The seventh movement is to disarm the political economy of perpetual war.

Peace requires changing incentives.

This means scrutinizing arms flows, sanctions, settlement profiteering, reconstruction profiteering, proxy warfare, resource capture, and diplomatic shielding.

External powers must be judged by the same life-ground test as local actors.

A foreign policy that protects strategic advantage while disabling regional life-capacity is not peacekeeping.

It is life-blind management.

At this point, we can introduce a key idea: wu-wei.

Wu-wei, pronounced “woo-way,” does not mean doing nothing.

It means non-forcing action.

It means acting in a way that respects the nature of the living field and opens possibilities without imposing a rigid external form.

In this framework, wu-wei means minimum sufficient intervention for maximum restoration of viable options.

Stop the bleeding.

Protect the vulnerable.

Restore water, food, shelter, and medicine.

Return hostages.

Prevent displacement.

Create safe spaces for truth.

Allow trust to grow where conditions make it possible.

Wu-wei acts firmly against life-destruction, but it does not try to force reconciliation before the field can bear it.

This leads to the Life-Coherence Arbitration Test.

When a crisis happens, when claims collide, when emotions are high, when each side sees its own survival at stake, slogans fail.

The arbitration test asks seven questions.

First: Who are the living unities affected?

Civilians. Children. Hostages. Prisoners. Refugees. Displaced families. Religious communities. Medical workers. Aid workers. Journalists. Teachers. Elders. Future generations. Ecosystems. Neighbouring states. Diaspora communities.

Second: What life-capacities are being enabled or disabled?

Survival. Food. Water. Shelter. Health care. Sanitation. Mobility. Safety. Mourning. Education. Cultural continuity. Religious access. Political participation. Legal protection. Ecological viability. Intergenerational future.

Third: Which needs are universal life-needs, and which are preferences, ideologies, or domination claims?

Fourth: Which harms are irreversible or intergenerational?

Death. Amputation. Childhood trauma. Famine. Epidemic disease. Destruction of hospitals. Destruction of schools. Forced displacement. Ecological collapse. Erasure of cultural memory. Intergenerational hatred. Collapse of legal trust.

Fifth: What options protect the greatest compossible range of life-capacities without sacrificing the vulnerable?

A compossible option protects the widest possible range of legitimate life-needs at the same time.

It asks:

What option allows Israeli civilians to be safe, Palestinian civilians to be free and protected, hostages to return, prisoners to receive due process, humanitarian systems to function, sacred sites to be protected, and political self-determination to remain possible?

Sixth: What minimum sufficient restraint is needed to prevent further life-destruction?

This rules out revenge.

It rules out humiliation.

It rules out starvation.

It rules out forced displacement.

It rules out indiscriminate attack.

It rules out collective punishment.

It rules out open-ended domination.

Seventh: What feedback, participation, monitoring, and repair mechanisms will correct the decision when it fails?

Every policy fails somewhere.

Every institution has blind spots.

Every security system can become self-justifying.

Every peace plan can be captured.

A life-coherent process must be corrigible. It must be able to learn.

And at the end, the final question is this:

Does this decision preserve, restore, or expand the life-capacity of all affected peoples without sacrificing the life-ground of the vulnerable?

If the answer is no, the decision is not life-coherent.

It may be strategic.

It may be popular.

It may be legalistic.

It may be emotionally satisfying.

It may satisfy one side's fear or rage.

But it is not life-coherent.

To understand why this matters, we must briefly hear the historical field.

In 1917, the Balfour Declaration expressed British support for a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine, while referring to the rights of the non-Jewish communities already living there.

From the beginning, refuge, land, empire, and political exclusion became entangled.

During the British Mandate, competing obligations were institutionalized, but a durable shared framework for belonging, sovereignty, and security was not created.

In 1947, the United Nations proposed partition into two states, one Jewish and one Arab, with a special regime for Jerusalem.

The plan was accepted by Jewish leadership and rejected by Arab leadership and neighbouring Arab states. It was not implemented peacefully.

In 1948, the State of Israel was declared. For Jewish communities, this became national refuge after centuries of persecution and the Holocaust.

For Palestinians, 1948 became the Nakba: catastrophe, dispossession, exile, loss of home, and rupture of social continuity.

A life-coherent reading must hold both meanings without allowing either to erase the other.

In 1967, Israel gained control of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza. The conflict became inseparable from occupation, settlements, borders, military control, legal inequality, mobility, water, economic access, political participation, and sovereignty.

The Oslo Accords of 1993 opened hope for mutual recognition and limited Palestinian self-governance. But borders, settlements, Jerusalem, refugees, sovereignty, security, mobility, and political equality remained unresolved.

After 2006, Gaza became trapped in a cycle of internal Palestinian division, Israeli security control, blockade, recurrent war, and humanitarian deterioration.

Then came 7 October 2023.

The Hamas-led attack, including killings and hostage-taking, intensified Israeli existential fear and reopened deep historical memories of vulnerability and annihilation.

The war that followed produced devastating civilian harm in Gaza: mass displacement, destruction, hunger, grief, collapse of health systems, and widening regional instability.

A life-coherent reading condemns deliberate attacks on civilians and hostage-taking.

It also refuses collective punishment, starvation, forced displacement, and destruction of civilian life-support systems.

One atrocity cannot become permission for another.

One people's fear cannot erase another people's survival.

Across this history, one pattern keeps returning.

A wound is created.

The wound is denied.

The denial becomes resentment.

The resentment becomes fear.

The fear becomes security doctrine.

The security doctrine becomes domination.

Domination produces new wounds.

The cycle begins again.

This is why the question cannot be only:

Who is right?

The deeper question is:

What must be protected, restored, and brought forth so that all affected peoples can live without destroying the life-ground of one another?

The Middle East conflict will not be healed by asking the wounded to forget, the fearful to relax, the dispossessed to be patient, or the powerful to be benevolent.

Nor will it be healed by sacred claims that deny the sacredness of another people's life.

The work of peace begins when the governing question changes.

Not: whose claim is final?

Not: whose wound is greatest?

Not: whose God authorizes victory?

Not: whose security permits another people's permanent insecurity?

But:

What must be protected, restored, and brought forth so that all affected peoples can live without destroying the life-ground of one another?

This is not weakness.

It is the realism of living systems.

Where life is destroyed, trauma returns.

Where humiliation is conserved, resentment returns.

Where denial is institutionalized, violence returns.

Where children inherit unprocessed wounds, the future becomes captive to the past.

A life-coherent peace begins with a covenant more basic than any state, party, empire, or doctrine:

No people's wound shall be denied.

No people's wound shall be enthroned.

No sacred memory shall authorize life-destruction.

No security shall be called security if it destroys the conditions of life.

No peace shall be called peace if it conserves domination.

No future shall be built by sacrificing the children of another.

The task is not to escape history.

The task is to metabolize history into responsibility.

Only then can the Middle East become not a graveyard of sacred claims, but a birthplace of shared custodianship.

Land as life-ground.

Memory as discipline.

Religion as reverence.

Sovereignty as responsibility.

Security as coexistence.

And peace as the protection of life's continuing possibility.

May we learn to protect not only what we claim, but what makes life possible for all.