Make all 'religious' incitement illegal

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History is filled with evidence that religions have at times been hijacked by political leaders in their struggle for power.

The inflammatory statement made by Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad during the tenth Islamic Summit Conference on October 16 regarding the supposed Jewish conspiracy to control the world is only another chilling illustration of this dark record. Such animosity in religion's name will inevitably result in more brutal acts of terrorism, both conventional and unconventional.

The Arab-Israeli conflict provides a convincing lesson that the perverse political use of Islam has contributed heavily to hatred, terrorism and wars. More specifically, in communicating with their co-religionists at home and abroad, both Arab and non-Arab Muslim leaders have focused on traditional anti-Semitic themes by citing Koran verses, interpreting Islamic historical experiences, evoking religious "principles," and misinterpreting Islam's customs and ceremonies.

Unfortunately, these efforts ignore the numerous calls for tolerance found in the Koran and have instead been aimed at "exposing" the "evil" nature of Jews and their religion, vilifying Zionism, and sanctifying the destruction of Israel. Jews have been described as the "most abominable of God's creatures," "God's adversaries," the "deadliest enemies," "worst of beasts," "poison," and "pests."

Moreover, the Bible on which Judaism is based was "forged" and "counterfeited" by "riffraff" who "falsified God's message." In light of these repugnant qualities and immoral activities, Muslims are therefore called upon "in the name of Allah" to raise the flag of "conquest and victory with Allah" in a "sacred Islamic battle" - a "holy liberation struggle" to "end the war that Muhammad began." As "protectors of religion," Muslims will "crush the foreign evil," "purify Holy Palestine from Zionist filth," "cleanse the sanctity of usurped Arab land," and thereby "regain honor and justice" and "bring back peace to the sacred Islamic homeland."

And so the concept of jihad, which regards any deviation as a renunciation of Islam, must be recognized as the key obstacle to regional and global efforts to advance the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians. Tragically, the identification of this "religious obligation" with Arab resistance to the Jewish state has had a profound influence on molding Islamic Israelphobia, particularly among more observant Muslims.

TO BE sure, religious violence is directed not only against Israel and world Jewry. The global terrorist network al-Qaida (also known as the International Islamic Front for Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders) exploits theology to the fullest against all its adversaries. For instance, Osama bin Laden issued a statement in May 1998 in which he asserted that it is the duty of Muslims to prepare as much force as possible to attack perceived enemies of God.

More recently, on October 18, 2003, bin Laden promised more suicide attacks inside and outside the United States. He also threatened nations supporting the "unjust war" in Iraq, particularly Australia, Britain, Italy, Japan, Poland, and Spain. Even cooperating Muslim countries such as Kuwait, he warned, will be targeted by "God's soldiers."

A glimpse of such terrorist escalation was provided recently by the series of attacks in Baghdad that ushered in the holy month of Ramadan. These coordinated suicide bombings, including an attack on the International Committee of the Red Cross, killed 34 people and wounded 224 and were allegedly perpetrated with the support of "foreign fighters" affiliated with al-Qaida.

In sum, what is of particular concern to anyone truly interested in international peace is not only the danger posed by education in religious hatred. The greater danger to civilization is the fear that if the recent Malaysian episode (which was not condemned by representatives of the 57 countries attending the Islamic Summit Conference) becomes an acceptable norm, then individuals, groups and nations will increasingly be drawn into distinct and clashing religious societies, each inhaling messages of uncompromising self-righteousness and conditioned for sacred violence without end.

Thus, the seemingly emergent trend is that instead of minimizing theological confrontations and maximizing interfaith relations in the post-9/11 era, political leaders are still servants of ethnic, racial and religious intolerance, terror and, ultimately, war.

IT WOULD therefore be prudent to consider developing a new strategy in the war of ideas, and expanding the capabilities of the rule of law. This strategy could entail the following elements:

First, appeal to political leaders to de-emphasize, if not completely eliminate, negative religious references in their rhetoric.

Second, declare the sanctity of Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and other major religions in a joint statement by the clergy of these faiths.

Third, seek condemnations by both public and private bodies of all forms of theologically oriented communication advocating hatred and violence.

Fourth, promote research by religious and educational institutions on the possible role of religion in advancing the cause of peace in stubborn regional conflicts.

And fifth, draft a new international convention to criminalize all religious incitement to violence.