

UNA LONDON AND SOUTH EAST REGION

BUILDING PEACE IN SYRIA

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE TO END BLOODSHED

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Introduction

Thanks Catherine and UNA London and Southeast for inviting me to speak on this important and timely topic of crisis in Syria. It is always a pleasure to come and speak to dedicated peace activists who are committed to make a better world.

In the continuing war in Syria around 400,000 people have lost their lives, with more casualties every day. Eastern part of the city of Aleppo, Syria, has already seen death and destruction almost beyond imagination. The conflict has displaced over 4 million and driven them in the neighbouring countries of Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and also to Europe. The involvement of many countries in the conflict including US, UK, France, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran and Israel threatens a all out global war. Killings, violence and suffering on a daily basis are turning Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya into virtual failed states. The reality is that wars, including the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, fuel migration and extremism. Wars and the refugee crisis also fuel arms industry profits, which boost the industry's capacity to influence public policy, generate more sales and sell more military hardware.

“The war in Syria” is not one civil war. It is a complicated chessboard of players, with multiple wars being waged by outside forces fighting each other alongside the Syrian civil war still raging between the regime and its domestic opponents. Those outside forces are fighting for various regional, sectarian, and global interests that have little or nothing to do with Syria—except that it is Syrians who are being killed. One wonders how a slaughter of innocent people of this magnitude including women and children can be allowed to happen in this day and age and one wonders why the international community and the United Nations with best of their efforts cannot bring peace to the region.

Saudi Arabia and Iran are fighting for regional hegemony and for Sunni versus Shi'a dominance; the United States and Russia are fighting for global and regional positioning, military bases, and control of resources; secular versus Islamist forces fight for dominance of the anti-Assad front; Turkey was fighting Russia (until recently, when it seemed to settle its differences with Russia before invading northern Syria, where now it is primarily going after the Kurds); the United States and Israel are fighting Iran (unlike in Iraq, where the United States and the Iranian-backed militias are on the same side in a broad anti-ISIS front); Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar vie for dominance among the Sunni monarchies; and while Turkey is fighting the Kurds, progressive Syrian Kurds are challenging the more traditional peshmerga of the Iraqi Kurdish regional government. Israel and Jabhat-al-Nusra, Islamists together are fighting against the Syrian Army backed by Assad.

Most of the intervening governments — including the United States, Russia, Europe, and Iran (though Saudi Arabia and Turkey remain uncertain at best)—want ISIS to lose. This is the complex nature of the Syrian conflict. If you are confused, you are not the only one

and that is one of the reasons ending the conflict in Syria has become so daunting as there are many layers to this conflict like peeling an onion.

The severe fallout of the conflict could result in the division and partition of Syria, Libya and Iraq into many states/countries, consequences of which will be rivalry, further violence and wars. We are already witnessing a grave fallout of the conflict which is the link of Western intervention, rise of terrorism and influx of refugees to different countries, which is often denied. Islamic State and other groups have grown dramatically in Syria, Iran and Afghanistan lately.

The trouble in Syria started when Bashar Assad refused to allow Qatar's proposal to construct a \$10 billion, 1,500km pipeline through Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria and Turkey in year 2000.

Assad further enraged the Gulf's Sunni monarchs by endorsing a Russian approved "Islamic pipeline" running from Iran's side of the gas field through Syria and to the ports of Lebanon. The Islamic pipeline would make Shia Iran instead of Sunni Qatar, the principal supplier to the European energy market and dramatically increase Tehran's influence in the Mid-East and the world. Israel also was understandably determined to derail the Islamic pipeline which would enrich Iran and Syria and presumably strengthen their proxies, Hezbollah and Hamas. To teach Assad a lesson, CIA, NATO and all the US proxies started a war against Syrian regime and funded ISIS and other terrorists organisations with the intention of dismantling Assad regime.

The Shia-Sunni conflict between Iran and Arab states, the involvement of USA, UK, France and Russia in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and other states, and the rise of radical Islamist Jihadism, have made the whole region a volatile background for proxy wars and melting pot for extremism and the rise of ISIS, Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups. These conflicts in Middle East and North Africa have a grave impact not only for the MENA region, but beyond for Europe as well.

The Obstacles to Peace in Syria

I am outlining obstacles to peace in the Syrian region below:

Obstacle 1: What to do with Assad?

The first expectedly has to do with President Bashar al-Assad. The United States, Russia, Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, the five major international and regional powers with influence in Syria, sharply diverge on the issue of Assad's future in Syria. The Saudi-U.S.-Turkey coalition's priority is the removal of Assad, whereas Iran and Russia's is to first eradicate from Syria the terrorist organizations that have occupied some 50 percent of the country and then to hold free elections monitored by the United Nations to decide the country's president and constitution.

Obstacle 2: How to effectively destroy terror groups in Syria?

The second key obstacle to a sustainable peace in Syria has to do with how to effectively destroy terrorist groups in the country like ISIS and Al-Qaida. The fact is that airstrikes killing innocent people end up creating more terrorists as a result and is not a solution. However, this is what is actually happening on the ground. Syrian Army supported by Russia and Iran is fighting the terrorists groups. On the other hand, US and its allies have been supporting many of the terrorists group and fighting the Syrian Army. This means continuation of war which has been going on for over 5 years, is turning into a permanent never ending war.

Obstacle 3: Extremist movements' ties to West's allies

The third dilemma is the reality that extremist Sunni movements such as Al Qaeda, ISIS and the like draw their ideology as well as the vast majority of their weaponry and financial support from the closest allies of the West in the region. It is time to realize that because ISIS is first and foremost an ideology and culture, not merely a militia, the world will never be able to defeat it as long as Western allies are actively promoting its ideology.

Obstacle 4: Fourthly, the beneficiaries of continued war and refugee crisis in the region are the oil suppliers, arms dealers, war profiteers, corporations, and elites who thrive in the continuation of the war and are a grave threat to the peace in the region.

Obstacle 5: Fifthly, the shadowy role of intelligence agencies is one of the root causes of creating conflicts where none existed. It has provided false evidence to justify new wars like the war in Iraq in 2003 started on the false pretext of existence of weapons of mass destruction.

Obstacle 6: Western military interventions in Muslim societies, economic exploitation, desperation caused by – poverty, unemployment and injustice, Shia-Sunni rivalry, violent interpretations of faith traditions are key obstacles for terrorism.

Obstacle 7: In Syria, the CIA and Pentagon run programmes to train thousands of new anti-ISIS and anti-Assad proxy army which has no legitimacy.

Building Peace in Syria based on EU Model

Peace in Syria and Middle East can only be built on non-violent alternatives and changing the mindset that creates wars. Instead, we need to uphold the Rule of Law, diplomacy and dialogue to end the conflicts which, the EU model of peace has shown to the world. European Union has successfully kept Europe peaceful for the last 70 years, longest in the history of Europe. Europe built institutions and infrastructures culminating in

European Union. These can be applied to the conflict in Syria and MENA region for building peace in the region.

The 10 Peace Factors have been the pacifying framework that has been proven to work in the European Union. Of the 30 most peaceful countries in the world in 2015, 20 were in Europe¹. The 10 factors² that brought internal peace to Europe must be applied to other continents.. These are the factors that bind nations together in a way that preserves goodwill.

There are organisations in the Arab World, like Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) which is the second largest inter-governmental organisation after United Nations. The Organisation is the collective voice of the Muslim world and ensuring to safeguard and protect the interests of the Muslim world in the spirit of promoting international peace and harmony among various people of the world. Another one is Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) an alliance of 6 Gulf countries. The purpose of the GCC is to achieve unity among its members based on their common objectives and their similar political and cultural identities, which are rooted in Islamic beliefs. OIC and GCC by uniting countries in the region are both capable of taking the idea of Arab Peace forward by following European Union's practical role in securing peace.

However, countries in the Arab world including Syria can only succeed if they unite together determined to build peace in the region, for this they have to bring Israel and Iran in their fold. The most important part of this unity is to stop violence and resistance to external interference by the West and outside powers which influence enmity and wars. Ultimately, it will be the vision of the leaders in the Arab World which will bring peace, by building respect for each other and sorting out their differences by tolerance, dialogue and diplomacy.

Steps to End the War in Syria

To stop bloodshed in Syria and the region, the following steps should be taken as a matter of urgency.

1. An immediate end to warfare, foreign aggression and start off multilateral negotiations. The US along with Russia and UN with other parties to the conflict should search for a broader diplomatic solution to the civil war in Syria which should involve ISIS, Al-Qaida, Nusra and the Assad government.

¹ Global Peace Index 2015

² Enshrined Democracy and Shared Values; Economic Truce; Open Borders and Human Ties; Soft Power and Common Purpose; Permanent Discussion, Dialogue and Diplomacy; Financial Incentives and Support; Veto and Consensus Building; Resistance to External Interference; Rules, Rights and Multiculturalism; Mutual Trust and Peaceful Coexistence

2. US, its allies and Russia must stop airstrikes and flooding the region with arms. US should stop continuously paying over \$3 billion of US taxpayer money to Israel and Russia should stop supporting Assad with military hardware.
3. An immediate end to all military, financial, logistical and intelligence support by the U.S., NATO and their regional allies to all foreign mercenaries and extremists in the Middle East Region. This also applies to Russia who is continuously bombing parts of Syria and unleashing new strikes from the sea from its naval base at Tartus on Syria's southern Mediterranean coast.
4. An immediate end to economic sanctions against Syria. Massive international aid for displaced people within Syria and Syrian refugees abroad.
5. Protect the rights of all Syrians, regardless of ethnicity or religious denomination
6. Ensure humanitarian access throughout the territory of Syria, and for internally displaced persons, refugees, and their host countries.

These are some of the solutions and lessons which are not utopian, and can be applied gradually over time to end the conflict in Syria.

Civil Society Actions

Let us bring changes by influencing policy makers by adopting nonviolent strategies to end war on terror and emphasising that more military and wars are never the solution.

1. Writing letters to editors to local papers, calling in to talk shows to local radio stations, contacting MP's, MEPs, Foreign Ministers of countries in conflict. All of these can play important role in educating the public and changing policy makers decisions to call for ceasefire and start of diplomatic negotiations to end the conflict in Syria.
2. Signing petition of www.handsoffsyriacoalition.net or follow Peace Party UK's restore positive peace and save Syria document.
3. Writing to UK Government to stop selling weapons to regimes who are slaughtering innocent civilians and violating their human rights. £7 billion worth of weapons have been sold to Saudi Arabia by UK Government since 2010
4. Join protest and campaign to highlight the public cost of war which is in the tune of billions of dollars that can be spent on jobs, healthcare and education.
5. Work along with faith communities to counter radicalisation and religious fundamentalism. People of different faith and communities in various parts of the world have lived together for centuries. For example, in my home country of India, we live peacefully with 180 million Muslims, third biggest Muslim population in the world.

6. Defeat terrorism by nurturing a culture of peace, bridge building between hostile communities, conflict prevention, economic and social aid and by inspiring young citizens via education to be peace leaders
7. Interesting development – President-elect Donald J. Trump said that the United States should focus on defeating the Islamic State, and find common ground with the Syrians and their Russian backers. He has, in the election campaign said that he is going to end aid to the rebels fighting the Syrian army. That might itself end the conflict and start the negotiations.

Conclusion

Only in a peaceful and independent Syria, free of foreign aggression, can the people of Syria freely exercise their sovereign rights, express their free will and make free choices about their government and their country's leadership.

For too long, scramble for resources like oil, water, food etc. and greed driven agenda has been allowed to go on causing violence, death and destabilising millions from homes, throughout Syria and the greater Middle East.

According to Global Peace Index, the economic impact of violence in 2015 was \$13.6 trillion in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms. This figure represents 13.3 per cent of the world's economic activity (gross world product) or \$1,876 for every person in the world.

What the major Western powers need to keep in mind is that their efforts in the past few decades to transform certain countries through military and political intervention have failed. Until this approach is abandoned in favour of pragmatism, the war on terror will not end and terrorist attacks in the West and elsewhere will continue.

The lesson for US, Russia and the proxies is to dismantle its military bases in the Middle East as military force has failed as a strategy for making it safer and defeating terrorists organisation. Instead of investing in military bases, US and Russia should increase its diplomatic political and humanitarian efforts to reduce conflicts across the region.

Robert Fisk recently wrote in The Independent that there must be a plan made for “Life after ISIS” in the Middle East. He gave an example that in the 2nd world war, Allied leaders planned for the post war world – a United Nations – years before the conflict ended. We must do the same for the Middle East. I agree and recommend that European Union model should be adopted to stop the conflicts in the Syria and the MENA region. It has to be on the basis that all – Jews, Muslims, Christians and all other minorities can live together and have peaceful coexistence.

To achieve peace, we need to take bold measures. One of them should be to include ISIS and al-Nusra front to negotiate in the peace talks, which should include the Arab League, the European Union, United Nations and other warring countries including US and

Russia. The Northern Ireland Peace Process was successful because all parties to the conflict entered into peace negotiations. That was the beginning of achieving peace in Northern Ireland. So we will have to do the same to bring peace in Syria and wider MENA region.

So, it begs the question – is peace, security and stability possible in Syria and Middle East? The answer is, it is possible if we get all parties to the dispute including Israelis, Palestinians, Hamas, Hezbollah, ISIS and their proxies (US, EU, Russia, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries) to get involved in earnest and hammer out a mutually consensus agreement. If an important lesson we can learn from recent invasion of Iraq by ISIS, it is that violent sectarian politics do not work. Instead what will work is equal power sharing structure between Shias, Sunnis and Kurds, to stop forces of tribalism, nationalism and scourge of war.

Therefore, the critical priority should be to clear Syria of terrorist groups, re-establish the country's territorial integrity, create the conditions for the return of displaced persons and refugees, and then leave it to Syrian people to choose their leadership through transparent, free and fair elections within the framework of a new constitution that enshrines protections for all minorities.

In conclusion, we as activists, policy makers, journalists, students have a daunting task of changing western policies around. The core message of my talk is, you can't bomb extremism – you can only bomb people. These bombing campaigns breed more terrorists. So let us build a new approach, grounded in diplomacy and negotiation, arms embargos to end violence, wars and militarism. Let us work towards lasting peace in Syria. Let us make peace, security and prosperity a reality.

Let me finish with an African proverb “When We Eat From A Common Dish, We Have No Enemies”

Thanks for listening.

The following articles were consulted and some excerpts have been taken as part of writing this lecture.

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Bio – **Vijay Mehta** is a distinguished author and leading peace activist and a champion for Development and Human Rights. He is the chair of Uniting for Peace (www.unitingforpeace.org) and Founding Trustee of Fortune Forum Charity (www.fortuneforum.org). He is a board member of National Executive of Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament

Working since 1979, Uniting for Peace is a non-profit organisation devoted to creating and promoting a global culture of peace, nonviolence and poverty reduction. The flagship campaign of Uniting for Peace is called 4D for World Peace. It is a campaign to create global frameworks for taking actions on interconnecting global issues of disarming and demilitarising the world and the savings thus achieved to be deployed for development and democracy.

The charity Fortune Forum whose founder is Renu Mehta, daughter of Vijay Mehta, held summits (2005 and 2006) where Former US President Clinton, Former US Vice President Al Gore and Actor Michael Douglas were keynote speakers. The summits raised over a million pounds for charity and attracted a worldwide audience of 1.3 billion people (one fifth of humanity) including print and media coverage.

Vijay Mehta’s books include *The Economics of Killing* (2012), *The Fortune Forum Code: For a Sustainable Future* (2006), *Arms No More* (2005) and *The United Nations and its Future in the 21st Century* (2005).

In 2014, Vijay Mehta’s bio, “The Audacity of Dreams” appeared in the book *Karma Kurry*, published by Jaico Publishing House (India). It included 25 other inspiring change-makers’ biographies. Nelson Mandela who wrote the foreword to the book, had this to say, “Ordinary people do extra ordinary things. These stories have that power to inspire people to rise and act, to make a difference.” To read Vijay Mehta’s full bio, please follow this link: <http://goo.gl/JcUGwr>

He has appeared in various TV programmes including BBC World, Press TV, Aitak-24 hour Indian news channel, and Think Peace documentary, Canada, among others. The Sunday Times, Independent, Observer and Guardian newspapers, among other journals have written about him. His life is devoted to the service of peace, humanity and our planet.

Vijay Mehta is the recipient of the Global Indian Karmaveer (Action hero) Puraskar (Award) by iCONGO (International Confederation of NGO's). He is now a noble-laureate 2012 – 2013 of the iCONGO team of advisors and mentors (www.icongo.in). It is an award for outstanding luminaries working for peace and social justice. He has been awarded as Global Peace Ambassador by Global Diversity Peace Centre London in 2015

Vijay Mehta's book "**The Economics of Killing: How the West Fuels Wars and Poverty in the Developing World**" is published by Pluto Press (UK) / Palgrave Macmillan (USA) / Amazon (Worldwide). For reviews and endorsements of the book, please visit: www.theeconomicsofkilling.org and was read and commented by figures such as Tony Benn, Mairead Maguire, Alice Walker and Deepak Chopra.

Vijay Mehta's new book "Exporting Europe's Peace" to be published next year makes the case for EU and its preservation of peace in Europe making the war on the continent unthinkable.

"Vijay....a long standing activist for peace, development, human rights and environment"
The Sunday Times Magazine, London 1st February, 2009

"Vijay Mehta lends intellectual credibility to the project and wrote 'The Fortune Forum Code for a Sustainable Future', a sort of manifesto that will underpin the group's future activities."
The Independent, London 26 September 2006

"Thank you for all you do Vijay - both the Organisation and yourself are inspiration and give us all hope that both yourself and Uniting for Peace can bring a world without war. Indeed it is possible, even in our own time."

Mairead Corrigan Maguire, Nobel Peace Laureate (1976)

Vijay Mehta is among the 1,300 Notable Peacemakers Throughout History
http://peace.maripo.com/p_peacemakers.htm

He is among the 98 Peace Philanthropists around the world.
http://peace.maripo.com/p_philanthropy_bios.htm