

MOVING TOWARDS PEACE

In Middle East and North Africa

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Peace in the Middle East: A Dream or Reality

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Introduction

The Arab world is going through a very difficult time and torn by conflicts raging in Syria, Iraq, Libya. Daily killings, violence, suffering and deterioration in Syria, now Iraq and uncertainty in Libya are turning these countries into virtual failed states. Fighting in Syria is continuing and has entered fourth year with 160 thousand lives lost and millions of refugees fleeing to border countries of Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon. Iraq is in the grip of the brutal invasion by ISIS. Egypt has reversed to a de facto military rule with possibility of revenge by Islamists.

These conflicts in Middle East and North Africa have a grave impact for the Israel-Palestine conflict and the factors which are responsible for carrying it out.

So, it begs the question - is peace, security and stability possible in Middle East? The answer is, it is possible if we get all parties to the dispute including Israelis, Palestinians, Hamas, Hezbollah and their proxies (US, EU and Arab countries) to get involved in earnest and hammer out a mutually consensus agreement. It may be easier now to broker peace after the recent Palestinian unity government to which European Union and US are open to work with. 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.

What I am going to do in my talk is to explore the obstacles to Israeli-Palestine conflict, examine the Arab League initiative for peace, the role of US in brokering peace and the successful peace process called Good Friday agreement in Northern Ireland and see how we can apply the lessons learnt to the Israeli- Palestine Conflict.

The Obstacles to Peace in Middle East and North Africa (MENA)

1. Palestinians are dealing with a rightwing Israeli government who are not willing to adopt moderate policies. Even worse Israeli's are building new settlements. Recent disappearance of three teenagers inside West Bank settlement block is not in any way conducive to peace.

2. Disillusionment of citizens and youth who have lost all hope for peace and are angry, violent and resentful.
3. No strong condemnation of Israel or effort by International community to take action to put an end to the crimes committed by occupation. No consideration of Palestinians political rights or justice by the Israelis and their constant daily struggle for survival.
4. The efforts of successive US governments in resolving the conflict, but are hindered by not being an honest and impartial broker.
5. Both parties sticking to their position of a one state, two state solution confusing and delaying the issue instead of solving it.
6. The recent conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan and Pakistan are a grave threat to peace in the region and the only beneficiary of continued war in the regions are the oil suppliers, arms dealers and war lords.
7. 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 existence of weapons of mass destruction.

Solutions and Actions

As the violence from the both sides Israel and Palestine continue, military involvement would be counter-productive. It is important to find solutions which are agreeable to all sides in the dispute for a peaceful future. The solutions include i) *The Arab League initiative for Peace*, ii) *The Role of US in Brokering Peace*, iii) *Learning and Applying Lessons from the History of Northern Ireland Peace Process*.

i) ***The Arab League initiative for Peace***

The Arab Peace Initiative (API), which was endorsed by the Arab League in Beirut in March 2002, and initiated by then crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, is an extraordinary document that requires all Arab countries to normalise relations with Israel in return for comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace.

"Israel needs to look hard at this initiative, which promises Israel peace with 22 Arab nations and 35 Muslim nations - a total of 57 nations that are standing and waiting for the possibility of making peace with Israel,"

The plan offers full recognition of Israel but only if it returned fully to the June 4, 1967 lines, including on the Golan Heights and in east Jerusalem, and to a "just solution" for Palestinian refugees. This plan has the support of United States, and should be the basis for negotiations. Softening the plan three months ago, a top Qatari official raised the possibility of land swaps in setting future Israeli-Palestinian borders.

The recent Arab League delegation in Amman affirmed "its support for John Kerry's efforts to revive peace talks between the Palestinian and Israeli sides and pointed out that the ideas put forward by Kerry before the committee provide the ground and a suitable environment to start negotiations, especially in new and important political, economic and security issues".

The Arab League delegation "expressed hope that this will lead to a launch of serious negotiations to address all final status issues to end the conflict and achieve a just and comprehensive peace between the Palestinians and Israelis which will bless the region with security, stability and prosperity."

ii) ***The Role of US in Brokering Peace***

The attempts of successive US Presidents including the present Obama administration to bring peace are laudable but questionable. The reason being attempts to bring peace in the region can only be

genuine if US stop funding Israel and its allies with latest high tech weaponry to the tune of \$3 billion to \$5 billion a year.

However, it needs to be an honest peace broker who can bring results with an inclusive approach to peace. If the US is having military exercises, training armies in the region, spreading chaos across the region, bombing so called terrorists with drone (unmanned aerial vehicle) attacks, then peace can hardly be a part of their agenda.

iii) ***Learning and Applying Lessons from the History of Northern Ireland Peace Process***

The 1998 Northern Ireland peace agreement was achieved because all parties had come together with UK, Irish Government and US engagement. It established genuine power sharing by Nationalists and Unionists with appropriate political institutions and reforming provisions on decommissioning, policing, human rights and prisoner release. The resultant “well functioning cooperation” was a surprise to many but now Northern Ireland is a very different place where resolutions of conflicts and differences are settled by the political process rather than use of violence.

Let me explore, how we can apply lessons and solutions from Northern Ireland for the Middle East Peace Process. These lessons, although not universal, and by no means one size fits all solutions. However, these are increasingly applied by Prime Ministers, Presidents, Diplomats and Intelligence Agencies to numerous areas of violence conflicts across the globe.

- a) First of all, there should be immediate cease fire to end violence as all parties are fed up with 60 years of infighting.
- b) Start negotiations with all parties in conflict including your sworn enemies in a trusted manner for sensible solutions.
- c) Agreement for a two state solution in which Palestinian statehood is recognised and Israel’s rights to its identity to exist is acknowledged.

- d) Agreement for equitable sharing of scarce resources – oil, water food, land etc.
- e) Strong Leaders and communities to develop trust, close and friendly relations without excluding any group. The need for integrated education for children to learn together with the other side for coexistence.
- f) Genuine efforts at decommissioning and prisoner release
- g) Setting up Israeli Arab Council to settle differences instead of resolving them on the battlefield
- h) Need for backing of international community for the peace process including funding based on common economic development of the region.
- i) No rigid preconditions for achieving the objectives of political peace process.

These are some of the solutions and lessons which are not utopian, and can be applied here as gradually over time they were applied in Northern Ireland Peace Process which is working successfully.

Conclusion

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 population in the world

What is needed is to give a new hope to the Middle East region suffering from militarism and wars in the region leading to uncontrollable force of tribalism, nationalism and scourge of war.

Despite the long history of conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, there are many people and peace organisations working on peaceful solutions that respect the rights of peoples on both sides.

The majority of both population on both sides prefer nonviolent methods to militaristic or violent ones for achieving self-determination and security. To do this, we need to acknowledge that our common humanity and human dignity is more important than our different traditions.

Palestinians and Israelis want peace and share a strong appreciation for the value of achieving it for security and prosperity. Therefore, we all need to continue to find ways to advance the peace process through the "nonviolent forms of resistance and negotiation" that both sides support.

The future of MENA lies in the hands of the civil society and the youth who should stand up and work together to claim peace, which is the birth right of all citizens of Israel and Palestine for reconciliation and development.

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 the greater Middle East. The cost of violence according to the Global Peace Index 2013 \$9.8 trillion, 11% of the global GDP or \$1,350 per person to put it into perspective.

To bring peace in the region, all the regional powers in the area should join together for dialogue and diplomacy to end war. They should follow policies of reason and sanity as once were adopted by visionary leaders of Europe thus, giving continent of Europe seventy years of peace envied across the globe.

In conclusion, let us make a firm resolve from today's conference to end violence, wars and militarism. Let us work towards lasting peace in the Middle East and North Africa. Let us make peace, security and prosperity a reality.

Thanks for listening.

For further reading and knowledge on the history of Northern Ireland Conflict and Peace Process, please read along:

Further Reading

History of Northern Ireland Peace Process

I had the good fortune of addressing Truth & Reconciliation Commission in Belfast in 2009 and met hunger strikers and prisoners who had suffered during the violence and the riots but now are committed to keeping peace in Northern Ireland. It was a greater learning experience.

The conflict in Northern Ireland began in its modern form with the 1921 division of Ireland which resulted in of political violence in Northern Ireland. It has reflected a struggle between different national, cultural and religious identities.

In the course of the 1970s and 1980s many attempts were made to arrive at some sort of compromise to end the violence which had begun to escalate with the growth of the civil rights movement in 1968/69. Eventually the talks and negotiations between SDLP (Social Democratic and Labour Party) leader John Hume and Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams began to intensify in the early to mid-1990s. With the active involvement of the British governments led by John Major and Tony Blair and the Irish governments led by Albert Reynolds, John Bruton and Bertie Ahern as well as through active engagement by the American Clinton administration specially of peace envoy George Mitchell and not least under the impression of renewed IRA violence a compromise solution was finally reached: the Good Friday Agreement of 10 April 1998.

The Good Friday Agreement, or Belfast Agreement, called for devolved government and thus for the transfer of power from London to Belfast. It also established a Northern Irish Assembly and Executive (the provincial government) in which unionists and nationalists share power. In addition a North-South Ministerial Council and a British-Irish Council was set up. Not least, the Good Friday Agreement also contained provisions on decommissioning, policing, human rights, and prisoners. The Agreement recognizes that a change in the status of Northern Ireland can only come about with the consent of the majority of the Northern Irish people.

Still, on the whole, the Northern Irish peace process appears to be working. The relatively well-functioning cooperation of a power-sharing government made up of unionists and nationalists was a surprise to many. This cooperation culminated when Ian Paisley, the first minister and notorious unionist firebrand, and his deputy Martin McGuinness, a former IRA commander, developed very close and friendly relations.

Since 1998 Northern Ireland has developed into a very different place; a place where increasingly democratic politics and the strictly enforced observation of human rights and individual liberties rather than the gun and the threat and the use of violence determine the political process. Northern Ireland also has become a much more pleasant place to live, and not just because of its fabulous countryside.

A number of the major reasons for the successful transformation of the 'Troubles' into a relatively well functioning Northern Irish peace process are listed below. Some of these points may serve as a model for other global peace processes. However, it must be recognized that many of the reasons listed below arose from the complexities of the local Northern Irish situation and cannot easily be transplanted to other countries and continents.

The Alternatives for a Long Term Peaceful Future for MENA

Among some of the main factors that have made a distinct contribution to the Northern Irish peace process and can be followed by Israeli, Palestinians are below:

- By the mid 1990s, an increasing exhaustion and tiredness with the conflict in Northern Ireland and its violence could be noticed and felt by citizens. The Palestine and Israeli conflict is now going on for over 60 years and all parties are longing for peace and it is a good starting point.
- The rising economic prosperity in both parts of Ireland throughout the 1990s until the recent global economic and financial crisis played an important part. So, what we need today is a international funding which can lead to mutual prosperity for a peaceful solution.

- There were strong local leaders such as John Hume, Gerry Adams and also Unionist leader David Trimble, who enjoyed the authority and respect of their followers and thus had the ability to embark upon serious negotiations. Similarly, we need a strong support of international community and leaders to see the peace process through.

- There was a growing realization that the Irish civil war could not be won by either side to the conflict in Northern Ireland. The UK government recognized that it was unlikely that Britain would lose the civil war in Northern Ireland but it was equally improbable that the UK would be able to gain a decisive victory in what had effectively become a guerrilla war. Same can be said about Israel Palestine conflict, both have to live together and share scarce resource of oil, water and food.

- All the governments, institutions and experts involved made a much greater effort than hitherto to actually understand the conflict and genuinely address the fears and vulnerabilities – perceived and very real ones – of both nationalists and unionists in Northern Ireland. Thus, much better and more thoughtful conflict management techniques were employed. The same can be said of the Middle East conflict in which all neighbouring countries in the MENA area should take part in earnest negotiations to resolve the issue.

- The role of integrated education was one of the major solutions in the Northern Ireland and it is a very relevant example for giving a realistic chance for democracy to survive. During the troubles, many parents wanted their children to learn together with the other side. This is crucial. Integrated education requires equitable representation of parents, staff and pupils of both or all communities so share in decision making. Integrated education is desperately needed for a multicultural cities of today. Learning together is a good way to rebuild faith in values of liberty equality and tolerance.

Talking to terrorists and learning from the Northern Ireland Peace Process is now held up as a beacon for conflict resolution around the world. The 'lessons of Ulster' have been applied by prime ministers, presidents, diplomats and intelligence agencies to numerous areas of violent conflict, including Spain, Sri Lanka, the Philippines and Afghanistan.

On the basis of the British experience in Northern Ireland, it is now widely agreed that talking to terrorists is a pre-requisite for peace, and that governments should avoid rigid pre-conditions in their attempts to bring extremists into the political process. It's a good time to revive interest in the Middle East after the formation of a Palestinian unity government after the Hamas, Fatah deal.

Making Peace in Northern Ireland suggest that what really matters is not the act of talking to terrorists itself, but a range of other variables including the role of state actors, intelligence agencies, hard power and the wider democratic process. These lessons can also be applied to Middle East Peace Process.

Too many of the players in any dispute are locked into extreme, unjust and unsustainable positions for too long – fed up by continuing violence. The extremists in any conflict need to be marginalised and identified and the mainstream needs to move forward with conviction to solve in seeking sensible solutions.

This article can be reproduced at anytime, anywhere.

Please watch 4D for World Peace film: "Change the World" –
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V9GEK4FFrXk>

Bio – **Vijay Mehta** is a renowned author, international speaker and global activist for peace, 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).

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. 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) Puraskaar (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 appointed a fellow of the New Westminster College, Province of British Columbia, Canada in 2013.

Vijay Mehta's new 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

"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