

## Making an Impossible Peace Possible – Options in Syria and the Middle East

Third Annual Peace Lecture Organised by Bristol Quakers, hosted by the University of Bristol

The lecture was delivered on 14<sup>th</sup> May 2016 by Dan Smith, Director of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Manchester.

He started by pointing out that no peace is possible anywhere unless there is understanding of what gives rise to extremism and atrocities. There must also be hope – “If you don’t accept the possibility of progress, you won’t find it”.

Dan divided the recent history of the Middle East roughly into four phases.

1. The period from the 1940s to 60s was a time of establishing a new order of independent countries. The state of Israel was created;
2. From the 1960s to the 90s the new order failed with the collapse of Lebanon, civil war in Algeria and Iraq-Iran rivalry;
3. Direct involvement by the West targeting Iraq and the Gulf states;
4. Since the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, wars in Kuwait, Iraq and Afghanistan. Dominant feelings in the area were the twin rejections of the rule of tyrants and of American domination.

Consideration of the problems of the Middle East had to take place in the context of a world that was gradually becoming less violent. There were fewer wars now and they tended to be shorter and caused fewer casualties. Peace agreements in recent years lasted longer than previously. We should not allow our thinking to be too much influenced by the media which always gives priority to bad news over good. While the world has become less violent, it was also noteworthy that since the end of the Cold War, the number of countries with a basically democratic system of government had increased from 51 to 88.

Dan reflected that, sadly, the record of human progress had not been maintained in the last 20 years and the turmoil in the Middle East was a significant factor. How do we get through the maze in order to promote peace? The first need was for understanding of the long-range pressures that lead to stressful social change. “Burundi is not Sweden gone wrong – it is Burundi”. Each country of the Middle East had a unique history and structure but the basis for peace and stability in any country was the quality of the relations between its institutions, formal and informal. The quality of the government, the function of the courts and the harmony of its neighbourhood relations were what mattered. Building peace was always a long-term and indirect process. Dan emphasised that the leaders of the West could not bring about peace in the Middle East from the outside. Only the Syrians could make Syria a peaceful country but the process could be helped from outside if that help were offered with knowledge and understanding. The need was to build prosperity, a sense of community and human dignity – then peace would follow. Knowledge and understanding had been lacking in recent years and the recent decision to allow RAF bombing of Syria reminded Dan of the definition of madness as continuing to carry out the same action while expecting a different outcome.

Dan went on to outline some of the factors he considered important. Firstly, he said, history mattered. Attitudes of people in the Middle East were still influenced by the era of the Ottoman Empire which had inflicted cruelties but still followed cosmopolitan policies. Secondly, Religion mattered as the Middle East was the birthplace of three world religions. Although the Israel/Palestine conflict caused relatively few deaths, it aroused strong passions on both sides. Countries of the Middle East were both unified and diverse – unified in that all in the Arab countries spoke Arabic but diverse in that Islam was subdivided into Shia, Sunni, Wahabi and other sects. Thirdly, European colonialism mattered and Dan pointed out that because the

Ottoman Empire had not been defeated in the First World War, the Sykes Picot line dividing the area into spheres of influence of Britain and France had not been implemented, but the two countries had achieved the same result through trade and force. Since the Second World War, Western powers had set out to impose a new world order and their influence in the area had introduced new ideas of nationalism and democracy. The very title 'Middle East' implied a colonial outlook – middle of what? – East of where?

Fourthly, the United States mattered with its demand for resources and its military, economic and political power. The long-term American presence, associated with Christian evangelism, was a source of resentment. Fifthly, Dan continued, Israel mattered and it was important for people in the West to understand the pain felt by Arab people over the existence of Israel. The creation of the state in 1948 was still commemorated by Palestinian people and their descendents as Nakba, 'the catastrophe'. The last of the factors Dan mentioned was oil wealth. The Middle East had half of the world's known oil reserves but provided only a third of production so, he said, the resources there would outlast reserves of oil in other parts of the world. The fact that so much government revenue comes from the sale of oil meant that there was little or no sense of responsibility to the population.

Dan went on to consider two important developments that gave rise to the Arab Spring. There was a strong Arab tradition that the leaders of any community should live modestly and people saw the gross opulence of their rulers as contradicting this. There was universal belief that taxation and representation should be inseparable but where democracy was denied, that heightened the sense of resentment. Secondly, the effects of climate change caused fluctuations and general increases in food prices which hit the poorest people. Both factors contributed to the spread of a revolution that had started with the first signs of extremism in Egypt in the 1960s under Nasser. Unrest on the streets had quickly led to militarization and now some 300,000 people had been killed in Syria. With the sole exception of Tunisia, country after country had been destabilised. The extremist groups were spreading terror and also in conflict between themselves

Dan's lecture was illustrated with maps and diagrams that illustrated the points he was making. A sequence of maps of Israel and Palestine over the years since 1948 showed graphically how Palestine had been destroyed as a viable independent state and Dan saw no possibility of resolving that conflict in the short term. There were signs of hope, however. The last pair of images showed firstly an execution being carried out by ISIS and, secondly, a line of hotel staff near Sousse, Tunisia, facing a gunman and defying him to shoot at Western tourists behind them. Peace could only come from people in the region aligning themselves with selfless helping rather than violent confrontation. In Syria there were local groups throughout the country negotiating and maintaining peace agreements. These were the brave individuals who would be where the impossible peace comes from. John Lennon had got it wrong – it was not 'Give peace a chance' but 'Peace gives you a chance'. Even a shallow, superficial peace could create the circumstances in which true peace and prosperity grew.

Finally, Dan offered advice to all in the West who sought to help: "Don't do harm; be patient; be hopeful".

## Questions and answers

### *1. Do the media help or hinder, here and there?*

Government-backed media tended to hinder progress. International media was of mixed quality, sometimes politicised but sometimes good e.g. Al Jazeera. Small-scale informal outlets were sometimes good but narrowly-based. The best commentaries were evidence-based unlike the claim that there were 70,000 moderate fighters in Syria that we could support. Two

publications worth reading are: 'Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War' by Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Shami (Pluto Press 2016) and 'Why Young Syrians Choose to Fight' obtainable from the International Alert website [www.international-alert.org](http://www.international-alert.org)

*2. Do you see a future for a unified, independent Kurdistan?*

There was no realistic prospect of an independent state for the Kurds – the relevant countries would not accept it. It would involve too many territories and countries. What might be possible was increasing autonomy in the area and, in the long term, some form of federalisation leading to accepted Kurdish areas in northern Syria and in Iraq. It was unlikely that Turkey would ever allow Kurdish control of any of its territory.

*3 Is there any explanation why ISIS haven't attacked USA interests in Israel?*

The Al Qaeda policy was to attack the near enemy by going for the distant one i.e. the United States. ISIS was also taking a long-term strategy by attacking the West but differed from Al Qaeda in that it was also planning to destroy Israel by a gradual expansion of the Caliphate.

*4. Given the history and culture of the Middle east and the rise of the caliphate, is that a movement towards peace for the region?*

Resistance in the area was partly because the Caliphate was being imposed by violence and also because ISIS was seen as a foreign force led by many of Saddam Hussein's former security staff. Its success so far had been largely due to its wealth. The propaganda didn't allow us to know what the true nature and purpose of the organisation was – whether the aim was simply to spread the Caliphate or whether ISIS was a platform for those who had enjoyed unlimited power to be part of a new power structure. No organisation that set out to recreate the world through mass destruction and terror could be a source of peace.

*5. In terms of the future, one of the most worrying aspects is the education of refugee children. The uneducated tend to be easily radicalized. Is this something we could and should, as the West, be attending to?*

The main factors that drove recruitment to extremist groups were lack of economic opportunities together with little sense of community and lack of education. Failure to meet these needs was storing trouble for the future.

*6. With the advance in solar power could we see the power of oil decrease?*

All measures to increase energy production from renewable sources must be welcomed. "We provide parking meters for every car on the street – why not electricity charging points?" However, population growth (100 million per year) and urbanisation (120 million per year) meant that transition to renewable sources would be slow. The world needed to do this anyway and along the way, the balance of power in the world might be redressed.

*7. What sense do you have of the groups in Syria talking to each other? Are there negotiations behind the scenes and how does the situation relate to UN activities?*

There were hundreds of fighting groups in Syria and they were not united (as were, for example, the various factions of the IRA in the conflict in Northern Ireland all fighting for Irish unity). For fighters in Syria, the main considerations were being paid and the availability of ammunition so they would switch from one group to another according to these conditions. ISIS might be starved of resources but it would then be replaced by another similar group. There had to be willingness to talk to the enemy which was seen to good effect in Northern Ireland and South Africa. It will have to apply to President Bashar al-Assad and the leaders of ISIS and we must accept that those involved will have to lie while the contacts are made.

*8. What are your thoughts on how we identify our cultural ideas? I feel that the prism of my background is really narrow.*

It was difficult to talk about many things without making large generalisations. Our attitudes were shaped by our culture and, as a result, important subgroups were excluded. Many problems of former colonies stemmed from the non-involvement of indigenous peoples in the governance of their land. Cultural recognition was essential so we should not speak of a country or a group like the Kurds as though it were a homogenous unity – it was not.