Why is global peace so elusive?

A hundred years after the outbreak of World War I, the populations in the Middle East and parts of Eastern Europe as well as in other parts of the world are victims of cruel military conflicts. European politicians are feverishly trying to find diplomatic solutions and to motivate the warring parties to solve their conflict through negotiations. So far to no avail! Why are we seeing this eruption of brutal warfare, religious fanatism, hate and geopolitical power struggles and unwillingness to settle problems through political negotiations? I do not pretend that I know the answer or answers to this question, but maybe, by recalling a few elements, an answer might emerge. I shall limit my remarks to the situation in the Middle East, in particular to the situation with regard to Iran, Iraq, Syria and Israel-Palestine.

Long-standing problems emerge and are combined with new elements

As can be expected the roots of these conflicts are long and they reach back deep into the history of the region. Generations have suffered the dire consequences of these conflicts, and now some fanatical leaders mobilize members of a young generation, which sees its future primarily in fighting the established order with weapons in their hands. Hundreds of young "fighters" from Western countries are joining the fighting. They have been enticed by fanatical preachers, social exclusion, and influenced by the innumerable militant computer plays and other products of the entertainment industry which show playfully violence in the most drastic form. These may have misled these young men to believe that all this is just a "play", which they need to win. Never having been given the chance to take responsibility for themselves or for something within the communities they grew up in, many with a broken record of formal education, they have had to define their world view within their reach. That it will turn out to be fatally wrong, not only for their victims, but also for themselves, will occur to them too late. They will be traumatized for the rest of their lives (as will their victims). We know all too well about the psychological damage wars inflict on those who fight them. The latest since 1918 are we aware in Europe that wars do not produce winners, but only lay the foundation for more destruction and wars. Western Europe has therefore resolved to settle all its conflicts "peacefully". The US government only came around to such a view since President Obama took office, but he still does not represent a majority view within the US political establishment and society. At this point in time he seems to be worn out by the relentless and sometimes abusive opposition to his leadership. The UN, founded in 1945 in the wake of the Second World War, was to be the forum where all conflicts around the world should be settled, but has not been able to evolve and operate in such a way that indeed today's conflicts will be taken to the respective UN bodies for settlement.

Historical roots of the military conflicts in the Middle East

History is a strange thing. It can be all things to all people. Historians accept that each generation is writing its history anew, because the

knowledge of history opens the mind to create a desirable future. History is also a continuum of events which are created by existing social and political structures and influenced by individuals. Current situations arise out of a series of threads which are interwoven or sometimes entangled. In the latter case, it is necessary to sort out such entanglements and to put some order into the various threads, in order to weave a new societal fabric. Clearly what we see today in the Middle East is a huge entanglement of ideas, interests and ideologies, social and political structures and egomaniac leaders. But nobody seems to have the ability so far to sort these entanglements out, and thus authoritarian and at times brutal leaders pretend to know where the way into the future is.

Little do we acknowledge that brutal fighting among families and tribes was part of daily life for centuries in this part of the world, until very recently. Colonial rule limited such fighting, but did not abolish it. Before colonial rule, societies in the Middle East functioned on the basis of cultural norms and routines, which changed only slowly, if at all, although the fortunes of a family or individuals could change dramatically within one life span. The cultural values gave the societies stability, but also made them vulnerable to outside influences or outside pressures. Often internal intrigues weakened their leaders so that they could not by themselves determine the change in their cultural values, and social, economic and political structures. Earlier than in Europe scientific knowledge was developed in urban centres in the Middle Eastern region; and in the 8th through 12th century AD the Muslim world produced scientists whose influence extended way into Europe, Africa and Asia.

What history of the Middle East then would have to be written today in order to find a way back to a past which made it to be an important cradle of human civilization and to chart a way forward to a more peaceful future?

Rewriting history in order to find a future

This is not the place to rewrite the history of the Middle East. But maybe a few pointers can be given how history would have to be rewritten. In this context it should be mentioned that the notion gains coinage among professional historians that for almost any historical event there were alternative solutions possible. In other words, we should guard ourselves against the view that decisions have no alternatives. In order to see the past and potential alternatives it is necessary to listen to the recollections and prevalent views of the people who have to live the consequences of past decisions and interactions.

For instance: Iran. Who in the West recalls that the CIA and the British secret service engineered the toppling of the Iranian Prime Minister Mossadegh in 1953, in order to preserve British interests in the exploration and exploitation of the Iranian oil resources? And yet, enmity and hostility in Iran to the West, and more specifically to the USA, goes back to these days and this event. When Madeleine Albright, the State Secretary under President Clinton, acknowledged in March 2000 the US involvement in the events in Iran in the 1950s, this was too late and too little to reopen a dialogue with the then

Iranian leaders. Who remembers that the Schah of Iran did almost nothing about the poverty in Iran, and was provoking the religious leaders in his country with disrespect of generally observed traditions and customs? But that we in the West have forgotten or, maybe, never widely knew these facts, does not mean that people in Iran are not aware of them. In other words, many a conflict of today is based on political decisions which were made many years, if not decades ago. Acknowledging these as mistakes today may not solve the problem, but it may get us out of the spiral of hate and actions of violent revenge.

For instance: Iraq. We have conveniently forgotten that the invasion of Iraq by the US and Great Britain under President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair in 2000 was justified by charges against Saddaam Hussein, which proved to be incorrect. In fact, the invasion was illegal according to prevailing international law. This decision by 2 Western leaders not only changed the course of the recent history of Iraq, but also of the international community, as it undermined the authority of the UN Security Council. Clearly, at this point in time, another decision could and should have been taken, and we would most likely see a very different situation in Iraq today.

 In Syria, the situation still is very different. A country created according to the will and whims of Great Britain and France in the 1920s, with no remarkable oil or other natural resources of interest to Western economies, remained a backwater of international development, preserving in a fragile balance the various segments of its multi-ethnic and multi-religious population through overpowering state controls, police surveillance and political leadership in the hands of one family for almost half a century. Using ruthlessly its political and state power, any opposition was crashed, and people lived in a political trance. Finally, events of the "Arab Spring" in other countries, especially in Egypt, gave encouragement to the urban elite in Damascus, Aleppo and other Syrian cities to come out and demonstrate for more political rights and modest political reforms. But their demonstrations were brutally surpressed; and so the country slid into a civil war, for which no end is in sight, and which has brought unwarranted destruction and suffering to millions of people. But even in Syria, an alternative course could have been taken, if our Western leaders were truly operating according to the rules established after 1945. Among all permanent UN Security Council leaders Russia was the one with the closest ties to the Syrian political leaders. Firmly Russia resisted the demands of the US and other Western countries to ask for the resignation of the Syrian President. Russia's assessment of the situation was that a change in the political leadership would only lead to a collapse of the state of Syria. Regrettably Russia did not provide an alternative to the demands of Western countries. Even the destruction of the chemical weapons of the Syrian army was not their idea, although it was fully supported by the Russian government. In a world, where we should operate rationally, the UN Security Council should have given Russia, as the currently most knowledgeable permanent member of the council with regard to Syria, the lead role in coordinating the international response to the sliding of Syria into a civil war.

Now the question arises: Why are we not managing conflicts according to our own rules? Partly, because the 5 permanent members are not trusting each other; partly, because the US government assumes that they are the only superpower today, and as such, they believe that they have first call on defining the terms and conditions for the settlement of any conflict anywhere in the world. It is not difficult to understand that such behavior will not go down well with all those whose political views, ideologies, traditions are different. Even if and when US leaders advocate for freedom and democracy, many in other countries receive this message as an ambiguous statement. Too often the US has in the recent past intervened militarily in the name of freedom and democracy, but in reality often only to enable free trade and foreign direct investment. Experience shows that flourishing market economies and democracy are not necessarily two sides of one coin, although they should be. But the rule of law as the linchpin in this equation is often only protecting the interests of those you are in power and not those who have been wronged by transactions. There are serious asymmetries in the global society today, which need to be corrected.

Nowhere is this truer, than in the conflict between Israel and Palestine. Again, the roots of the conflict are going back at least 100 years. But, the situation has dramatically changed over this period of time, and both in Israel as well as in Palestine there are a great number of people who realize this, and would prefer a peaceful life as neighbors. Why are they not coming to the fore and determine the situation? What is it that could be done from the outside to facilitate such a political change in both societies and political leadership? Impartial rather than partisan support for one would certainly help.

Should the UN Security Council intervene? Would a resolution carry enough weight to tip the balance? Should the Council impose a weapons' embargo? Here as for all countries and warring parties in other countries? How would such an embargo be enforced? Besides, an embargo may neither lead to an immediate end of the military conflict, nor would it in and of itself create a situation in which all parties will sit as equals around a negotiation table. But it would create more space for diplomatic action and political negotiations and hopefully in the long run lead to a situation, where armed conflict is, as a matter of principle, not regarded as a legitimate means of a political process.

Such a policy under UN auspices would also lead to a situation where all member states have to shoulder an equal share of the responsibility to create a more peaceful world. Both countries which produce and export weapons as well as countries which buy weapons and deliver them to "their clients" will be forced to change their actions. We shall need a lot of brainpower and political acumen to dismantle once and for all the military industrial complex, of which President Eisenhower warned the world in the early 1950s.

Of course, disarmament alone will not bring us to a culture of peaceful settlement of conflicts. Not all views are equally amenable to settle conflicts. The intolerant view and militant attitude of some

religious leaders may never be overcome, and the only way to reduce the influence of such thought leaders is by isolating them and giving them a reduced and well circumscribed space for their teachings. It may be too Eurocentric a view to ask for a separation of the state and the religious institutions in the Muslim countries, but the centuries of religious tolerance should be evoked and those living by these standards should be supported. This seems in particular necessary for the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. Often European historians compare the fight between the Shiites and the Sunnis to the religious wars which raged in Europe in the 16 – 17th centuries between the Catholics and the Protestants. But history does not repeat itself, and thus the conflict between these two schools of thought in the Muslim world will have to find their own solution. A kind of Westphalia Peace Agreement is needed, but one which is negotiated by Muslim parties to the conflicts and which can be respected by all Muslims.

For Western European countries: Engagement or just humanitarian assistance?

Living in Western Europe in a relatively peaceful situation, but only one generation removed from the devastations and upheavals which the Second World War brought, we can but empathize with the sufferings of the people in these war-torn areas. In Germany and other countries a political debate has started about what we can do to end the fighting and overcome brutality and destruction. How should we engage? Shall we deliver weapons to the "good fighters" to win against the "bad" ones? Do we always know who is who? Will it be enough? Why have the efforts to bring the Syrian political leaders to talk to each other been suspended? Are we all unable to learn or, can we really afford such indifference and/or impatience?

Providing humanitarian assistance is necessary and goes without saying. But can we limit our interventions to this? Questions over questions with few answers. Nevertheless a way forward needs to be charted. Let me spell out some elements of our collective way forward.

Towards a global view – 10 essential steps

1. The world cannot only globalize economically, but political change cannot be achieved through military action

The development of a market economy needs as a companion the development of a democratic system. These can vary in their actual appearance, but participation of all segments of the society, fairness in the economy, and equality before the law, equity in economic, social and cultural terms and transparency and accountability within the power structures of the state and the economic and social elites are prerequisites for a peaceful society. These are principles, and their translation into practice requires an everlasting and renewed effort. A democratic system is not achieved once and for all. It demands constant review and adjustment, in particular in a setting where the economy is moving at a very dynamic pace. Besides, there are big variations in today's societies, and there is no country with an ideal score card. Hence democracy is an aspirational

objective, and the way to achieve democracy is as important as the goal. Measures of soft power are stronger than the application of hard power. But soft power can also be exercised in a non-democratic way and thus can lead to conflicts, even violent ones.

The dominance of the US entertainment industry is a case in point. The unrestrained application of violent actions against 'evil forces' in films and computer games, which are particularly watched and played by children and adolescent youth, are setting behavioral standards which open the door to violence in daily life. It would be welcomed if the industry would agree on a standard which restrains the graphic description of violence in the virtual world. As we have restrains in real life, we should not pretend that a lack of restraint does not have its influence on the real world. Because we see that tolerating violence in the virtual world can become a recipe for destruction and terrible brutal violence in real life when it is combined with radical religious views of the world. The skillful handling of the videotaping technology and the postings of graphically violent films on the Internet by terrorist groups have amply illustrated this aspect.

 Armed brutal revolt cannot be overcome by soft power measures alone, but stand alone hard power options in isolation of other measures are equally an inadequate response.

2. International and national political action has to be legitimate

The flying of US army reconnaissance missions over Syrian territory without permission by Syrian authorities or a mandate from the UN Security Council is a recipe for a disaster to happen. To question the legitimacy of Baschar Al Assad and the government he leads is one thing, but the US government and their allies have to challenge Assad by asking him to resume talks with the Syrian opposition forces. Until such talks are resumed we have to ignore his offer of fighting together with his army against ISIS on ethical grounds. Any possibility of cooperation should be dependent on a joint request from the sitting government and its opposition and a blueprint for an orderly transfer to a new government. Only by combining hard power and soft power measures in a creative way, will the dissolution of Syria be stopped and the brutally killing ISIS forces politically isolated and ultimately overcome. Time is not on the side of those attempting such a complex strategy, therefore, in addition, a mandate by the Security Council should be sought in order to legitimize any foreign military action in Syria and to signal to the current Syrian government that in the eyes of the international community they have lost their authority to determine alone what is in the best interest of the Syrian people, without such legitimacy they cannot be allies against ISIS.

As often in extremist political groups they do not hesitate to seek financing from illicit trade and ISIS is no exception. While a coalition with the governments which initially supported ISIS, like Qatar and Saudi Arabia is indispensable, a stepped up effort to interrupt internationally illegal arms trade, smuggling of drugs and other precious materials is indispensable. In particular, faced with the ongoing fighting the international trade in ammunition should be

curtailed so much that eventually the fighting has to stop just because of a lack of ammunition.

3. Asymmetries between and within countries need to be managed and overcome

A particularly demanding case is the conflict between the Hamas in Gaza and the Israeli government. The Israeli military appears to be better at combining soft and hard power measures, while the Hamas militants just fire their rockets towards Israeli territory, seemingly without any leadership and restraining control by the civilian Hamas government. There are other dissimilarities: Israel acts in a defensive mode, while the Hamas acts in a revolting mode. The Israeli side has a clear command structure under a civilian leadership, the Hamas has a partly clandestine and decentralized political structure making rational political priority setting difficult, if not impossible. Israel has a well organized state; Palestine is still in a state-building phase. Both sides are actively seeking external support for their respective policy. Israel is clearly more successful in this than the Palestinian leaders. The Palestinian leaders appear as the underdog in this conflict rather than as an equal opponent.

However, in one aspect both sides are very similar: their populations hold humongous prejudices about each other. A very telling illustration was the recent film "Dancing in Jaffa", which, however, also showed a possible solution. In this conflict there can only be a long-term non-military solution, if and when the Israeli and the Palestinian population receive innumerable opportunities to interact with each other and remove their mutual prejudices. The early phases of such a peace-building process will be fraught with risks that on either side, the orthodox and fanatical forces will violently oppose such a process. There may well be suicide and other bomb attacks against civilians on either side of the border, but it is worth a try. There are civilian victims now and no solution in sight, there might be civilian victims, but a solution in sight, in particular if the respective security forces learn to work with each other. Admittedly this would amount to a huge paradigm shift, but one which the Israelis and the Palestinians could manage on their own with minimal support from the outside. If external, impartial monitoring is required then this should be done strictly under UN auspices. This could and should include military support to **both** sides. A better trained and modern Palestinian army and police may be the biggest peace guarantor.

4. Acting internationally through a strengthened UN system

As we can see time and again, many conflicts arise out of asymmetries between nations, and inequities within nations. Yet many economic, cultural and political actors reach beyond national boundaries. In the name of freedom, free trade, self-determination regrettably a lot of naked power is being employed. Often we do not walk the talk, but we talk one thing and we do another. In the West we are currently shocked by Russia's actions towards and within the Ukraine, but as reprehensible this is, is it not a reflection of many an action of the Western countries? This does not make either acceptable and it does not serve the purposes of creating a modern civilian society everywhere, in which conflicts are settled through

negotiations or by the rule of law. It is particularly vexing that Russia is engaging in such a policy, when the USA has a President who has a vision of a world beyond one superpower's dominance. The partial withdrawal of the USA from military interventions around the world is perceived as weakness rather than the beginning of a paradigm shift in how global politics should and could be carried out in future. It is equally shameful that the UN organizations are not stepping up to a level of engagement which supports such a paradigm shift.

We would need more of a UN general, than secretary as Mr. Ban Ki Moon understands his role. This does not mean that we need a UN secretary-general who is higher ranked or outplaying the elected or otherwise accepted leaders of member states. But we need one who is acting at their level discreetly in the background and fostering dialogue and change towards a geopolitical situation where inequalities are reduced, interests and international power struggles brought to the negotiation table, power imbalances minimized and a new economic and global paradigm shift is actively pursued. It may sound like squaring the circle, but only if we can create a level playing field for all countries and accept diversity at the same time, will we leave the current quagmire behind us.

5. Sharing the global burden – creating a multi-polar world

Creating a level playing field for all countries does not mean that all countries can shoulder the global burden equally. There are huge differences in size, population, participation in global trade and investments, all this needs to be taken into account if and when a fairer world shall emerge. One path towards such a future would be the acceptance of a multi-polar world, which would be duly reflected in the UN Security Council. For instance, the Americas, the EU and other European countries, Russia and Central Asia, China and Northeast Asia, India and Southeast Asia, Australia and Oceania, Egypt and the Arab countries, South Africa and Sub Saharan Africa could be such geopolitical centres in a global network of nations. The emergence of a multi-polar world would be fraught with difficulties, e.g. where do Japan, the Ukraine, Israel fit in? But nevertheless such a regional approach will avoid the dependence on and the dominance of **one** superpower. It will, however, only be a step in a more peaceful way if all nations are agreed on a set of ground rules, such as the Charter of the UN, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the two subsequent covenants, and a strengthened international justice and security system. Neither the authority of the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Justice Court are large enough nor are the statute and composition of the UN blue helmet troops sufficient. A lot of thinking, international agreements and resourcing of these institutions will be required to enable them to perform in the required way. For now, we regrettably see erosion rather than a strengthening of these international bodies, with yet unknown long-term consequences.

6. Acting nationally, but with a global perspective

As shown above, a future multi-polar world will be roughly divided into 8 regions. These 8 regions should, as mentioned, also form the

basis for a reformed UN security council. While in each region more than one country will appear as particularly strong and powerful, a rotational system of regional leadership should balance any such differences, but the eight countries which are the lead countries within a specific period of time need to be respectful of each other and sufficiently trusting that in a given crisis the most suitable representative within a region can be chosen in order to coordinate the response to the crisis. A major failing of the current Security Council is that the five permanent members do not trust each other, never have and it looks will not do so in the foreseeable future. But a UN Security Council which cannot pull together on a given task will not be able to discharge its duties. A change of the current situation appears highly unlikely at this moment. We can only hope that it does not need an eruption of more tension and violence than we are already seeing at the moment, to generate such a change. Both the League of Nations and the United Nations came in response to the two world wars of the 20th century. Do we really need a similar war in order to come to our senses?

A continuation of the ongoing wars around the world will bring incredible suffering to hundreds of million people and a destruction of civil political behavior. It will destroy the basic fabric in many societies, which will take generations to recreate. It also will take generations to overcome the traumas of individuals, families and communities which have been torn apart by past and today's wars. Many have become refugees and may never recover from their displacement. We should have the courage to think globally in order to stop this suffering.

7. Addressing inequities, inequalities, marginalization and exclusion

For more than a decade we have had global goals to address the social, economic and environmental challenges on a global scale, namely the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). At the moment we are in the process of finalizing a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which are to guide the national policies of all member states of the UN beyond 2015. But how can we make the implementation of these goals to happen?

There is a big step forward from the MDGs to the SDGs. The former were mostly considered relevant to developing countries. The SDGs are to be applicable to all countries. But this implies that we shall be entering a global competition for the best ideas, innovation, and a rethinking of our current guiding principles. First and foremost economists are challenged to measure economic growth in new ways, which will give weight to social equity and environmental sustainability rather than financial and volume output of any kind of production. Will we be bold enough to create such a new school of economics?

8. Being on the same page

One of the biggest challenges in today's world is how to get 200 member states of the UN, which represent the peoples of this world, agreed to a common approach and to follow it.

One of the missing building blocks is that religious beliefs belong into the personal realm, and should not influence political life. Immediately we think of the Muslim world. But I think in many countries with a Christian or Buddhist majority we have the same challenge. Religious tolerance in a society is a sign of sanity, but also of strong civilian and secular principles and the implementation of human rights. Here, too, we need to be bold in order to reflect and change some of our "treasured" cultural values by everyone, everywhere. Only if we move into a situation of mutual trust and respect will we handle our conflicts through dialogue and negotiations.

9. Getting it right the first time round

As the world changes around us, so we need to change. Too many political leaders think that raising living standards is the primary goal for us all. But managing this challenge is not sufficient. We live in a world where a fair distribution of wealth is the biggest challenge. Getting this right without stifling creativity and innovation and allowing for diversity and differences based on merit is no walk in the park. There is today no country which has satisfactorily met this challenge. The worldwide competition is thus on.

We need to get change right and the first time round and at the right moment. Very often we react, and then we act too late. Sometimes we are aggressive in the name of progress. In either case our actions become hasty and are not based on sound information and analysis and on at least a consensus view of the majority. Therefore we need to be prepared to constantly observe what is happening around us and raise our objections promptly when we believe trends and events are not moving in a desirable direction. Our lives may have less drama and fewer crises than today, but it will still not be idyllic, only one with less open violence and without wars.

10. Avoiding conflict resolution through military means

At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century a number of international conventions were negotiated, signed and ratified on the subject of protecting civilians against the atrocities of wars. Confronted with the war crimes committed in the last decades, one can but ask for a revision and updating of these conventions. First such negotiations will help to make this aspect of international law more widely known; second it will strengthen the authority of the International Criminal Court in the persecution of war crimes.

Furthermore we need to reinforce the regulations for international arms trade and in particular the trade in ammunition. Only if and when the volume of arms and ammunition on the world market is initially made more expensive and in the long term is reduced and only available to legitimate powers will we see a reduction in armed conflicts.

Last but not least we need a strong armed force with police character, which operates under mandates of a reformed Security

Council. NATO should be transformed into a global alliance, negotiations with Russia should be resumed and the agreement between the UN and NATO be acted upon. This appears today as a great leap of faith. But do we have a better alternative, if we want conflicts to be settled through non-military means?

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