

The Bigger Picture Perspective on Intractable Hotspots such as Israel and Iraq

We send our soldiers and weapons to the world's intractable hotspots during times of conflict; why not send the world's ablest peacemakers during quiet times when progress on healing is more feasible?

Israel, Iraq, Kosovo, and Northern Ireland are examples of areas of the world in which rival groups of people living in close proximity share a history of intractable conflict. These conflicts are characterized by deep-seated resentment, mistrust, hatred and fear. Each participating group has a litany of atrocities suffered at the hands of the other. Irreconcilable claims to land and religious mandates keep the disputes alive despite the passage of time and efforts to resolve them through negotiation and force.

The conflicts may at times appear quiet as one group or the other has the upper hand, but the powder keg lies embedded in the psyche of the people ready to explode when an event provides the spark. Perhaps areas like Northern Ireland or the Balkans, which are quiet at the moment, have found a peace that will last. The true test is whether the peace withstands a provocation, such as the type of kidnapping that occurred on the West Bank in Israel in June 2014. If the powder keg has not been defused during times of quiet, this type of provocation will ignite it and the cycle of violence and resentment will resume.

The repercussions of these hotspots are global. Nearly all of us are frustrated by the inability of our standard methods of resolving conflicts to bring about a lasting peace. There is clearly a need to find a better way to stop the bloodshed and strife. The fact that the problem has captured our collective attention means a step forward in our spiritual evolution is at hand and the progress is intended to be global.

From our encounter with Hitler, we learned that we can be impacted by calculated acts of aggression in other parts of the world even though they do not directly target our people or property. We learned that the best time to stop such a Hitler-like force is to intervene on behalf of the hapless target before the Hitler-like force grows to the point where it is a threat to us. The fact that Hitler also used the power and land he accumulated to initiate genocide on a scale not previously seen. Humanity paid dearly for the slowness with which the rest of the world responded to Hitler's aggression and oppression.

This lesson has influenced the United States and other countries when responding post World War II to perceived acts of aggression in Korea, Vietnam, the Balkans, Kuwait, Iraq and elsewhere. Acting on this lesson, however, we have learned that military action for the sole purpose of stopping a wrong leaves us in a "no man's land." If we were motivated by imperialism or greed, our path would be clear and we would continue until we dominate or destroy. Our collective ideals no longer allow that. When the goal is not to conquer, but merely to stop aggression against others, it would seem that the task would be easier and quicker. Too often, however, that has not been the case particularly when the perceived aggressor is

committed to the cause, not hesitant to terrorize, and prepared to use innocent civilians as human shields.

Thus, the effort to do the right thing places us in ‘no win’ situations. We draw blood and bleed to stop conduct that will not stop and in fact is energized by the violence and hatred of war. It may seem at times that we are doing more harm than good. Military conflict, no matter how well intended and managed, hurts innocent people. It gets worse when the “enemy” hides among the innocent and the fallibility of our leaders and soldiers result in atrocities committed by our people in the fog of war. Making a bad situation worse, the people we intervene to protect are also fallible and sometimes take action such as atrocities or corruption that conflict with the moral values we intervened to uphold. No matter who wins, the “hard feelings” that led to the problem usually get harder and survive any temporary defeat. Our clear, morally inspired mission becomes a mess that costs us in blood and resources. We typically incur as much enmity as gratitude.

Hitler taught us that failure to intervene when aggression and genocide could have been stopped does not sit well with our collective conscience. Yet military intervention has not provided the complete answer we had hoped for. Our education is not over. There is more to be learned.

Military intervention and political brokering address the symptoms found in the world’s intractable hotspots without paying enough attention to the underlying cause – the ever growing powder keg. In times of conflict, such as that currently underway in Israel and Iraq, there is not much that can be done other than to try to restore the peace and stop the bleeding. When things are stabilized, such as Israel was six months ago and the Balkans are now, it is not prudent to rest on our laurels. Periods of quiet and stability are the best times to intervene to encourage reconciliation and healing on a person to person basis.

If we cared enough to send bombers into the Balkans in the 1990’s to stop atrocities, should not we consider asking our spiritual leaders and healers, of as many faiths as will answer the call, to go to the Balkans and other such hotspots to work with the local leaders to create the climate for understanding, healing, and forgiveness? Institutes to teach forgiveness in schools and public showed some success in Northern Ireland. Mahatma Gandhi provided a shining example in India, Martin Luther King in the United States and Nelson Mandela in South Africa.

In Cambodia, in the wake of the “killing fields,” many Cambodians found peace in the ancient Buddhist chant, “Hate does not cease by hate, but by love alone is hatred healed.” An article in the May 21, 1999 New York Times reported on a ceremony of reconciliation held on the grounds of the most infamous killing field. The ceremony was led by Buddhist monks and the deputy governor of Phenom Penh. Oddly, some “western countries” apparently chose to criticize the reconciliation efforts and push for retribution rather than commending forgiveness. As Nelson Mandela demonstrated in South Africa, hatred is healed by love and forgiveness, not by retribution.

This is the only way to bring true peace between people who are born into a legacy of ancient mistrust, anger and hatred. It is futile to attempt to sort out who did what to whom.

Forgiveness, love and healing need to be nurtured vigorously on a person-to-person basis so the bond between former enemies will be strong enough to withstand a change in the politics (such as the collapse of the Berlin Wall) or the rise of a demagogue (such as Hitler). Every person who moves a step closer to healing, forgiveness and repentance makes a very tangible step forward for mankind as a whole.

Forgiveness and healing do not make all of the problems go away, but they will knock them down to a more manageable size. Taking away the mistrust and the powder keg allows political solutions to become possible. Former enemies can find a way to share the same space and allow both to prosper. It is not an easy lesson to learn, but it can be done. The question is how long it will take us to recognize the lesson's importance and start giving it the priority it deserves. Delay in starting only prolongs the pain.