

The Business of Peace

June 7, 2004

Why Peace is Bad for Business

From the remote and idealistic perspective of the United States, it is often perplexing why there is no peace here in the Middle East between Israel and the Palestinians. After all, there have been countless summits, resolutions, plans, handshakes and photo opportunities. There are negotiators and experts who have spent their entire careers on this issue and are now ready for retirement, no closer to delivering peace than the day they started. After so much effort and attention from nearly every world political body and civilization, why does peace remain such a distant prospect? The answer is simple: it's bad for business.

Our time here has taught me that peace in the Middle East is bad for the business of every single individual, regional and geopolitical stakeholder, including America.

The Individual Stakeholders

For the foot soldiers, peace would be a disaster economically and socially. Particularly in the Palestinian and Arab community, being a soldier in the war to liberate Palestine is a path to social status that is unobtainable by almost any other means. How else can a poor boy rise from the squalor of the refugee camps to have his face plastered across entire buildings? The only route to hero worship and economic security for their families is to blow themselves up, along with a few dozen Israeli women and children (Arab countries routinely provide sizable cash payments to the families of suicide bombers. The bombers are literally "buying the farm" for their families.) Even if they don't choose to become a martyr, being a fighter is still among the highest status positions in the community, with small children dressing the part and playing games emulating their heroes. Would you trade the power of your AK47 automatic rifle and the hero worship of your community to return to a life as a goat herder or an unemployed youth standing on a street corner? Peace, for the foot soldier, means the loss of power, the loss of social status, and a return to a non-descript life devoid of hope.

Being a leader or a major player in a group involved in the conflict brings status and power on both sides. The Israeli Likud party, and its leader Ariel Sharon, would never have risen to power without the conflict driving voters to their camp. The PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization), and its leader, Yassar Arafat, would never be able to retain their single party grip on political power and exclusive representation of the Palestinian people without the conflict keeping alive his iconic status as sole spokesperson and elected leader. Militant groups like Hamas and the Iranian sponsored Hezbollah would never be able to draw financial support from Islamic countries and recruits from the streets without the conflict to incite the passions of the masses. In all cases, the conflict keeps them in business. Without the conflict, they are just another old military officer, just another politician, just another shop keeper, just another goat herder, just another student, just another unemployed camp dweller. With the conflict, they have power, they have position, they have the hero worship of their communities, and most importantly, they have high status, high powered, influence wielding jobs. Peace, for the leaders, means the loss of their careers, along with most or all of their prestige, influence, power and money.

The Regional Stakeholders

From the street gangs of the Gaza Strip to the royal family in Riyadh, every regional stakeholder knows peace is not in their economic interests.

The Business of Peace

For the PLO, peace would be an unmitigated disaster. It would mean free elections and the rise of opposition parties vying for power and access to the lucrative, mafia-like, corrupt economic engine that the PLO has perfected over the last 30 years. Arafat, in particular, has absolutely nothing to gain from peace. His entire persona is built on his lifelong fight for the return of Palestine. If peace is accomplished without the full victory of driving the Jews into the sea along with the right of return for the Palestinian refugees (the ability for displaced Palestinians to return to their ancestral homes and lands in Israel), he is a failure in the eyes of many, if not most, hard line Arabs. As long as there is conflict, he remains the light of hope for millions of refugees, he remains the toast of the world as the official Palestinian representative and he will continue to be treated like a head of state of a member of the family of nations. As long as there is conflict, he remains in power. For Arafat and the PLO, peace means loss of prestige and loss of power.

For Hamas, Hezbollah and the other groups responsible for the bombings, shootings and other violence, peace would mean the end of their existence. They would be reduced to running the social service agencies they hide behind to maintain legitimacy in the international community. It would be impossible to continue to receive untold millions from the Arab world to fund their violence and a stream of young recruits from the camps for the cannon fodder if all they had to offer was meals on wheels for the elderly instead of bombs on wheels for the Israelis. For Hamas, Hezbollah, and their ilk, peace means the end of the noble cause, the end of the dream of a united Palestine cleansed of the Jewish pig infidels, the end of social and political status, the end of careers, the end of power and the end of the world as they know it.

For Likud and the rest of the right wing of the Israeli political spectrum, peace would mean the end of political legitimacy and political power. The Israeli right wing rose to power in the wake of bombings and other attacks by Hamas, Hezbollah and other Palestinian groups. An increase in violence usually swings terrified Israeli voters towards the right, their simple solutions to the complex problems of the region providing comfort in troubled times. Close observers of Israeli politics have noticed that in recent elections there is usually an upsurge in violent attacks against Israel close to the polling dates. These attacks are often in retaliation for punitive Israeli attacks against Palestinian camps, organizations or leaders. In most cases, the electorate dutifully swings to the right and elects more rabid right wingers, who drive more repressive measures, leading to more retributions, thus extending the cycle of violence and, not accidentally, keeping the groups on both sides of the conflict in the driver's seat of their respective societies. It is in the best interests of every Palestinian political and militant group that a hard line right wing government remains in power in Israel. The crippling economic, social and political policies of the Israeli right motivate the Palestinian people, and the entire Arab and Islamic world, to provide unquestioning support to the PLO, Hamas, Hezbollah and their brethren. The best ally of Likud is the suicide bombers of Hezbollah, and visa versa. For Likud, peace means the end of power, and more importantly, the end of access to influence, patronage and prestige.

For neighboring Jordan, peace, as currently outlined in the existing international plans, protocols and resolutions, would be a demographic disaster. There are currently millions of Palestinians living in refugee camps in Jordan. Most of these people are second and third generation refugees who have never known any other home but Jordan. The Palestinian refugees have a birth rate that guarantees that the number of Palestinians in Jordan will exceed the number of Jordanians. If there is peace without the right of return, Jordan instantly becomes, in effect, East Palestine, with more Palestinian citizens than Jordanian citizens. While it is true that Jordan is a kingdom, with nearly unlimited powers vested in the throne, it is political reality that it will be impossible to keep the lid on the boiling pot of a Palestinian majority in a country ruled by a royal family who do not even hail from Jordan and who were artificially installed by the Europeans in their closing act of colonialism. Peace, as it is currently defined, for Jordan, means the end of their national identity and a probable accelerated slide towards a revolution and an Iranian style Islamic theocracy.

The Business of Peace

For neighboring Syria, peace means the end of their role as the last remaining Arab state standing firm against the Zionists and their hegemonic American sponsors. With the fall of Saddam and the political reversal of Mohamar Khadafi, there is no other major nation in the region that has built its reputation by opposing the Jewish state and America. Syria has made an industry of providing the aid and comfort infrastructure to Palestinian groups operating militarily against Israel. For every dollar provided by the Arab oil states to fund these groups, Syria gets a cut. This adds up to significant contributions to Syria's relatively small GNP. Syria's prestige is high among the Arab street, being viewed as a noble Arab nation fighting the good fight against the Zionists and Crusader invaders. For Syria, peace means the loss of prestige, the loss of influence and the loss of millions of dollars flowing into its coffers.

For the Arab oil states, peace means the end of arguably the best political diversion in the history of mankind. By keeping daily headlines and video of the latest Israeli atrocities committed with American military hardware in front of their citizens, these states keep the focus away from themselves. The majority of the citizens of the oil states are not sharing in the untold riches of the ruling classes, thus giving rise to resentment and unhappiness across the region. In addition, over 50% of the population of the Arab world is under the age of 28. Millions and millions of angry, unemployed young men does not add up to political stability, unless you can find a way to vent their frustrations and anger. The Palestinian/Israeli conflict and the complimentary "America is the Great Satan" campaign are the best possible antidote. As long as there is no peace, and as long as America can be cast as the cause of all the world's problems, the various Emirs, Kings, Potentates and tin pot dictators of the region can keep pumping millions into their Swiss bank accounts and using their gold plated toilets. It is no accident that Al Jezerah and the other Arab news channels are all located in or funded by Arab oil producing countries, nor that their content is designed to pour fuel 24 hours a day on the anti-Israel and anti-American flames. For the Arab oil states, peace would mean the loss of their governments' ability to divert their populations' attention away from their often failed states, widespread corruption and dubious legitimacy.

For the Islamists (those seeking a pan-Islamic empire, ruled under Islamic law, cleansed of infidels and apostates) such as Osama Bin Laden's Al Qaeda and the Taliban, peace means the loss of their core economic engine. The Palestinian conflict is the white hot furnace that fuels the heat of rage in nearly every Arab in the region. Without the steady pulse of conflict, there is no bellows pumping air into the fires of hatred. Without the hatred, there are no volunteers for Jihad (holy war) against the Jews and the West (America being the featured target du jour). Without the volunteers, there is no army, and without the army, there is no legitimacy. Without the legitimacy, there is no reason for the oil states to provide funding, and without funding, there is no Islamist movement. For the Islamists, peace means the end of the dream of the Islamist superpower nation state.

For Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria, peace brings a special challenge, and one that is probably the single greatest driver for perpetuating the status quo: the Kurds. The Kurds are the world's largest ethnic group without their own nation. They have repeatedly been denied nationhood by the world's great powers and suffered untold instances of slaughter, repression and economic injustice at the hands of their various rulers. Kurdish lands are currently partitioned between northwestern Iran, northern Iraq, northeastern Syria and southeastern Turkey. Peace for these countries means the Kurdish issue will rise to the top of the agenda of every international body, conference and working group on the Middle East. Suddenly, the voices of the Kurds will be heard and the world will be forced to answer the question of why these 25 to 35 million people (no accurate census exists) have been denied their national identity. The questions will lead to empowerment of the Kurdish freedom movements and a new cycle of revolution, repression and war will begin. Peace, for Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria, means long and bloody civil wars and an eventual loss of a portion of their nations to a newly formed Kurdish homeland.

The Geopolitical Stakeholders

For Europe, peace would mean the loss of a critical component of their strategy to lower the power and influence of the United States on the global geopolitical stage. Just as 7-Up was positioned as the “Un-Cola,” Europe has positioned itself as the “Un-America.” In order for this to be a positive for Europe, it is critical that America be consistently presented, referred to and viewed in a negative light. There is no better way to lower perceptions of America in the entire Islamic world than the nightly images of Palestinians being killed with U.S. supplied weapons followed by reports of the U.S. vetoing yet another Security Council resolution to protect the Israelis. Coupled with Europe’s high level of anti-Semitism, the “Un-America” Middle East strategy is very popular with Europe’s electorate, allowing them to enjoy a position of self-anointed moral superiority, while not being personally involved in killing Israeli civilians. The view from this region is that the best possible scenario for Europe is the status quo, in which the ongoing Palestinian conflict feeds anti-American terrorism to keep the U.S. pinned down at home, generates widespread negative attitudes and outcomes for the U.S. across the Arab world and enhances Europe’s stature as the “Un-America” refuge for all who oppose the warmongering, world-threatening, Imperialist U.S. From this perspective, without the Israeli/Palestinian conflict to fan the flames of anti-Americanism and drive the cause of the Islamists, some Europeans’ vision of an emasculated, cowed America pocked with smoking craters of terrorist violence could be unrealized. Here, more than any other region I’ve been except South Asia, people have a dramatically different view of Europe than we do in America. Being only a generation or two removed from the rule of Europe, they have strong views on their former masters. The feeling here is the local people understand the geopolitical game, know how skillfully Europe is playing it, and have deeply held views on what they are up to. Like South Asia in having been exploited, plundered, raped and pillaged by the Europeans, this region has a deep vein of mistrust for Europe and its strategies, along with grudging respect for their ruthless ability to execute them. In both regions, in the context of geopolitics, Europe is seen in a far less flattering light than in America. Without the ongoing Israeli /Palestinian conflict to occupy the region and the world, more attention would be paid to the sometimes cozy relationships between certain European countries and the Islamist groups. For instance, using Middle East logic, there is a direct connection between Spain disobeying Germany by supporting America in Iraq, the subsequent Islamist bombings in Madrid, Spain’s obedient behavior since then and the “Newest Best Friends” relationship currently flowering between Spain and Syria. From the viewpoint of this region, for Europe, peace means the loss of a very effective smoke screen for their activities and regional agendas and the loss of a key element of their geopolitical strategy to supplant the United States as the leading Western civilization with their self-perceived superior economic, environmental, social, moral and cultural model.

For India and China, peace means the loss of a valuable diversion on the international stage. While the world is pre-occupied with the Middle Eastern conflict, they are free to continue their rapid economic expansion largely free from the critical gaze of the international community. The less bandwidth the world has available to pay attention to their ongoing environmental disasters, tenuous grips on their largest-in-the-world populations and growing stealth superpower status, the better off they are. In addition, like Europe, India and China both profit from an accelerated decline in America’s stature in the world. While the ascension of India and China to superiority is inevitable, and in the case of China, arguably already in place, the ongoing erosion of American prestige that is part and parcel of the conflict works to their advantage. The positioning of America as the sole responsible party for everything wrong in the Middle East aids the long term goal of securing oil supplies for their oil-import-dependant economies in a potentially reshaped Islamist controlled Middle East. Peace, for India and China, means an unwelcome place in the often unflattering international spotlight and the loss of a valuable aid in their rise to world dominance.

The Business of Peace

For America, peace would mean the probable fall of every American friendly government in the Arab oil producing states due to the loss of their primary diversionary tool to keep their populations under control. This would likely yield Islamist theocracy governments, nationalized oil industries, and populations very willing to undergo economic hardship in order to impose an oil embargo on the United States. The resulting domestic economic chaos would cripple America, just at a time when it was already falling in prominence relative to Europe, China and India. Domestically, peace would greatly complicate placating the Jewish and fundamental Christian camps. As long as the conflict continues, going through the motions of periodic peace plans, initiatives and summits suffices to keep those two disproportionately powerful voter and influence blocs satiated. For America, peace means domestic political challenges in meeting the expectations of two very powerful interest groups as well as short- to mid-term economic chaos and accelerated decline in mid- to long-term economic and geopolitical influence.

Conclusion

To the average American, blessed with a goodly amount of common sense, positive outlook, ingenuity and sense of fair play, it seems impossible that a reasonable solution to the ongoing Israeli/Palestinian conflict couldn't be worked out by now. As you can see, the reason there is no peace has nothing to do with common sense logic. The reason there is no peace is that it would be bad for business for all involved.

Welcome to the Realpolitik of the Middle East.



Satellite dishes and television antennas crowd the rooftops of Damascus, Syria. Every day, millions of Arabs receive a steady diet of news from state run media and Arab news stations about Israeli atrocities using American weapons and knee jerk American support for any and all Israeli policies and actions. As long as this steady drumbeat continues, nothing will change for America in this region.