Dr. Oliver Sacks, a British neurologist who practiced at the Beth Abraham Hospital in New York City, worked with a group of survivors of the 1920s “sleeping sickness” (encephalitis lethargica), who had been “resting” in a catatonic state for decades. In 1969, Dr. Sacks treated these patients with the drug L-Dopa, which miraculously revived them from their decades-long “sleep,” back to life. Unfortunately, however, the results of the treatment were only temporary and it was not long before the patients relapsed to their catatonic state. This story, which has since been written into a screenplay entitled Awakenings, may well bear some similarity to the Middle East peace process, should that process that began in 1991 ultimately fail.

Are we truly deserving of peace when:

- We allow so many opportunities (i.e., Camp David I & II) to fall by the wayside, whether by circumstance or by design?
- A segment of one population can so easily belittle the Holocaust while a portion of another cannot grasp how the existence of a foreign occupation inadvertently degrades another people?
- Pain can be traded so easily in rhetorical exchanges?
- Complex feelings of peace are so easily eclipsed by feelings of fear and insecurity?
- We can so easily give way to extremism?

In this consideration, perhaps we are not so deserving of peace. Yet, so many people suffer every day in the Middle East. In our region, there exists a constituency in the form of a younger generation that believes we must do better.

Middle East

What is worrisome in the Middle East is that we are quickly approaching a point where the Arab side can no longer be convinced that it is possible to achieve peace because of developments around Jerusalem. Should Israel seize all the territory in East Jerusalem, as it is now doing, there will be no peace. Israel will then realize no one will come to its aid in respect of the grim demographic challenges confronting it, and it will have to navigate its future course on its own. At the present time, it is important to get the proximity talks moving and to develop a path that will lead us out of this situation and deliver us to a peace built on two states, living side by side in peace and security. To many, this may seem utterly impossible. However, it is important to consider that in July 1995, nearly everyone believed that peace in the Balkans, especially in
Bosnia, was also impossible. Despite ceasefire attempt after ceasefire attempt from 1992-1995, the war continued and we had met failure at every junction. Six months later the killing ended. Today, an entire generation of Bosnians has grown up without the daily fear of death. Hence, peace is always possible.

It is important that in the practice of diplomacy, one quickly understands three things:

1. We are simply unable to read the script of unfolding developments; there are simply too many variables at play over which we have little knowledge.
2. The media does not give us much information about what is actually happening. It provides a snapshot – like a game of chess already in progress being presented before an observer – it can tell you of a situation, but it cannot provide instant insight as to what the protagonists or chess players are thinking nor an idea of where they are going with their strategies.
3. So often do we get it wrong, after all we are not prophets, if we were to forecast doom perhaps something productive would emerge.

But even if we cannot anticipate events accurately, there are broad trajectories that cause us to worry. Consider the case of Iran and its nuclear capability. Still today, many remain fearful of Iran’s nuclear power being transformed into military program. One and a half years ago, there had been much attention around this issue, not simply because of the challenges it presents, but also – and from a positive angle – because it would compel us to arrive at a Middle East peace settlement. There was another infusion of energy around this issue when President Barack Obama entered office. Now, it is clear that it will be a much more difficult endeavor than initially anticipated.

What needs to happen, more generally, is that we must somehow extract the energy from the current state of affairs and calm international tensions. We must ensure we never again see occurrences like that which occurred on 21 August 1969 when Michael Dennis Rohan, an Australian tourist, burnt down the Al Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem – an event which led to days of intense rioting and that was decades before the broader religious revivalism so commonplace in the Middle East today. It is difficult to determine the implications of such an action were it to occur today on our international relations. It would leave the Middle East pitched on its head. There would certainly exist the possibility of a folding-in of the various crises in our region into one gigantic political emergency beyond that which we are able to handle.

*International Leadership*

The United Nations Security Council is one of the principal organs of the United Nations. As provided for in the UN Charter, the UNSC’s powers include the establishment of peacekeeping operations, the formulation of international sanctions, as well as the authorization of military action. Members of the UNSC convene on occasion to discuss matters of tremendous international concern – such as the Iranian nuclear program – to decide both whether and how the international community should respond. These discussions are often brought to an abrupt halt when, for scheduling reasons, a mandate renewal or more routine issue requiring the Council’s attention, is brought forward for consideration. The mixing of the pressing with the
routine has essentially reduced the UNSC to a mere working group. Moreover, the capitals of
the permanent members have been on point historically to deal with major crises, and this must
not change. What should change is that the other members of the UNSC should be properly
involved in the consultations. Today, this is not the case. Not everyone represented on the
Council has a role in the formulation of decisions of global importance. In such an environment,
we run the risk of finding ourselves in a deep trough very soon.

Currently, the UNSC is developing sanctions to impose on Iran by the first week of April, though
it may take longer to get such sanctions passed, given the composition of its membership and the
fact the P5+1 have been in charge of the file. However, the true challenge facing the Council
will be the actual implementation of any decision reached by the UN Security Council. After all,
who implements these decisions? It is not the UNSC, but the neighboring and frontline states
that implement the punitive measures required by a sanctions resolution. In Iraq, for instance,
when punitive sanctions were imposed on Saddam Hussein in the 1990s, inspectors were
everywhere in Jordan – both in Jordan’s maritime port in the south and also in the eastern desert
– to monitor and inspect the goods flowing into Iraq. And these inspectors did not enter our
banks; however, tomorrow in respect of Iran, this would likely happen in the countries bordering
Iran.

In the years prior to World War II, the League of Nations had known that Europe was on a path
to serious trouble, but leaders had believed that some outside trajectory would somehow interrupt
the continent’s march in this direction. We cannot simply anticipate that such a trajectory will
interrupt a growing momentum toward a great crisis as it evolves today. The region is in major
trouble and if we do not act in time, we could indeed cause ourselves a great amount of harm.

Questions and Answers

It has been amazing to witness the lack of desperation on the part of Israelis given what the status
quo will bring them. Indeed, there are more young Israelis leaving the country than there are
Jews arriving in Israel. The time has come when the Israelis need to negotiate final status issues
with the Palestinian authority and end the occupation. Should there be no negotiations, the
region could slide into extremism. There will be Palestinian elections and who knows what kind
of group will enter power next? Before long, the Hamas could seem like moderates compared to
the power that may come on its heels. If this conflict continues much longer, Israel will be left
with the “ball” – the Arab/Palestinian population under its control – which it does not want and
will not be able to do anything with. It is hard to say what Israel would do in such a situation.

No one in the international community besides Israel believes that the annexation of East
Jerusalem is lawful – it is a case in which the entire international community is on one side and
Israel is on the other.

The great failure on the Arab side is that there has been focus on rights and legal issues in
international forums at the expense of our properly understanding how psychological all of this is
for the Israelis. During one set of talks with an Israeli delegation, the central message from the
Israelis was that psychology was everything. The Israelis need to trust the Arabs and they do
not. The Arabs have not fully internalized this. This lack of understanding only leads to another
impediment: every Israeli doubts that their lively state – complete with its energetic culture and vibrant institutions – will continue to exist. It can be felt in every discussion and this then creates a high security threshold, such that Israel is able to always find reason to not fully commit itself to peace. Even when Jordan removed its land mines along the Jordan-Israel border, Israel has refused to follow suit, due to this lack of trust.

The dimensions of the problems in the next 10-15 years are enormous and the upcoming generation already has much on their plate. The problems in the Middle East will only become exacerbated unless we find a way to create a shelter of peace. And this is part of a broader challenge. Unfortunately, we, as an international community, seem incapable of doing the work that our predecessors were able to accomplish, even during the Cold War. At one point, there had been an explosion of treaty making and we succeeded in the creation of a multilateral structure in which we aimed to resolve our disputes and strive to attain higher ideals, hence, the Geneva Conventions and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. If we tried to negotiate these same conventions today, however, we simply would not be able to do it.

So where are we going? Consider this metaphor first raised by a Singaporean ambassador and friend: we are all aboard this great ship and each country inhabits its own little cabin. Western countries such as the United States are in the first class cabins, complete with all the amenities. Countries like Jordan and those in the Middle East inhabit lower-class cabins and have the hope that with economic development, they can one day move into a higher-class cabin. And we each take care to defend our cabin against unwarranted intrusion. However, with all this going on, who is worrying about the ship?

President Obama alone cannot do it. There needs to be a concentration of committed foreign ministers who can develop and implement an international agenda beyond their own individual national tastes. Yes, the state of the global economy complicates matters, but diplomats need to articulate a vision on where we need to go as a global community and then push for it. If you look at the private sector, you see that it is so full of ingenuity that cannot be matched in the public sector. We need to change this.

It is true the European Union, by speaking with a single voice at the UN, has pumped oxygen back into other movements that previously had been dying on the vine, like the NAM and the G77. The environment at the UN has therefore become very negative over the years. A better system would be one in which each nation acts individually in presenting their proposals and ideas, and all nations can together engage in the discussion. It is important to realize that what eventually succeeds in the international system is not as a result of governments negotiating, but of individuals who happen to represent governments negotiating. In other words, different diplomats that represent the same government can produce widely different results. It would be great for the international community as a whole if more diplomats were active and creative, as well as diplomatic, in their approach to policy.

By no means should we be slow in our efforts toward peace in the Middle East. A recent Indian research study has shown that $12 trillion has been spent on the Middle East conflict, or potential earning lost because of it, since 1991. This is money that could and should have been invested in education, infrastructure and the like. So all-consuming has the Middle East conflict been that,
to my knowledge, there has been not one major international conference since 1948 convened to confront a global issue in which a major Arab or Israeli initiative or proposal – detached from the Middle East region -- has come forward, not one. Arab nations and Israel – at the level of governments -- are therefore not contributing to the broader discussions involving the international community. Furthermore, the conflict that occupies them poses a constant danger to the stability of the planet, and the conflict is a drain on resources. For these three reasons, we must settle this conflict and attain peace as soon as we possible can.

Hopefully, in the next few months, the ICC Review Conference in Kampala will be able to adopt the amendment to the Rome Statute on the Crime of Aggression – the crime described by the Nuremberg Tribunal as the “supreme international crime.” Never again should anything near the scale of what Nuremburg sought to expose ever be repeated. The 20th century was filled with bloodletting; how can we ensure that the 21st century will not be the same? If we as an international community can provide a deterrent to unimaginable crimes, by supporting the ICC, then this will be a good thing for everyone.