

(In)Securing Each Other!

Khaled Mansour*

Beirut, 2006. My adrenalin level shot up so high that I felt every part of my body down to the tips of my toes in a state of alert, as I walked deeper into the cavernous neon-lit parking lot and away from the half glass entrance that I just bolted. I had just strongly advised, or almost ordered, a French security officer to put away his loaded gun and immediately back off from the locked door.

Angry protesters had earlier stormed the ground and upper floors of the UN headquarters in Beirut. Half an hour earlier I was sitting in my office. If I looked through the window from my sixth-floor office I could see the demonstrators growing more agitated. If I turned towards the flat TV screen on the wall, I could see their faces up close on live coverage from Al-Jazeera and a few other channels. I turned to my computer and resumed writing my report when a security officer almost yanked me and hurried me down the stairs. We had made the last turn towards the car park as the first demonstrator broke open the entrance to the ground floor a few meters away.

We watched our impending doom live on a couple of TV screens in the basement as the pounding and breaking noises shook the ceiling above our heads. I called several TV stations. We are over 100 humans still in the building that angry protesters seem to be setting fire to, I said. Our death would not return to life the hundreds of Lebanese who have been killed by ceaseless, indiscriminate and disproportionate Israeli air raids and bombardment in the past couple of weeks. “We are not the enemy ... there is no sense in taking revenge against an institution because it could not help you and because you cannot retaliate against a powerful opponent”. My fear was mixed up inextricably with anger and disgust at all parties including the protesters. It was like for some few minutes I gave up on it all or even trying to make sense of it. Maybe it was my repeated indignant pleas but more probably interventions by senior officials and top Hizbollah politicians, one of them coming himself to the building, that finally calmed down what could have turned into the last day of my life, together with that of many others. Such a possible “last day” had gone by several times in my life, and it might have contributed to a sense of false security at times, but at most other times it caused in me an abiding anxiety that led to an obsession with security while continuously drawing me toward insecure places.

Earlier that week, I had visited Tyre, Qana and other communities in southern Lebanon from where hundreds of thousands of residents had fled the Israeli pounding, a massively disproportionate revenge attack after Hizbollah killed three Israeli soldiers and kidnapped two in a brazen operation in mid-July 2006. During that visit, I saw families exhuming the bodies of loved ones from makeshift tombs on road sides because it had become relatively safe during one day of ceasefire to finally move

them to their eternal resting place in a cemetery. A UN relief aid team whose coordinates was known to the Israelis and to the Lebanese was jolted by aerial bombardment that hit a couple of hundred meters away. This complex, sad and extremely disproportionate fight between the unchecked power of Israel and the angry, justified albeit manipulated, and at times self-defeating acts of resistance or revenge by militias from Lebanon, had been recurrent since 1978. Invariably the material and human losses were dramatically far heavier on the Lebanese and Palestinian sides.

I was born in Cairo one year before the 1967 six-day war in which Israel occupied vast tracts of land in three Arab countries and brought all the Palestinians who still lived in the Gaza strip, the West Bank and Jerusalem under its rule – but not as citizens. More than 50 years later, millions of Palestinians* suffer an apartheid-like system, or even legally worse for those who live in the occupied territories. Israel's ceaseless search for security - almost exclusively for its Jewish majority – has taken it into five or six wars not to mention the tens of incursions and raids on several neighboring countries and the untold tens of billions of dollars spent on armament, defense and attack capabilities. All these policies have systematically generated deep levels of multi-faceted insecurities for the Palestinians and for people in neighbouring countries.

To make matters worse, so-called geopolitical and security concerns from Tehran to Riyadh, to Abu Dhabi to Sanaa and to Cairo, and the intervention of regional and international powers (Turkey, Iran, Russia and the US to name the main players) have been creating unprecedented levels of insecurity to the people who live in this region and beyond.

The Syrian Baathist regime, long known for its cruelty now occupies a place of dishonor among murderous regimes with a macabre record of gruesome killing, bombing, torture, disappearance and venturing into new terrains of wild bestiality towards humans. In the past seven years, aided by Russian forces, Iranian soldiers and Hizbollah fighters, it has killed over half a million Syrians and displaced half the population of the country or 10 million people inside and to outside their homeland. Intervening countries either back Assad or kill their own enemies or (especially from Sunni Gulf countries until recently) bankroll some of the most nihilist versions of Jihadi Islamist militias for their own geostrategic interests. What started as peaceful uprisings against a Kleptocracy turned into a complex war by proxy in which some of the long brutalized are now running wild either under the banners of ISIS or as pro Assad vigilante.

* About 20% of Israel's citizens, or 1.7 million people, are descendants of Palestinians who were given Israeli citizenships after they refused to leave or were not forcibly re-moved in 1948 when Israel was set up on Palestinian land that was previously under a British mandate.

Since I graduated from university in 1988, I have travelled a great deal in many African and Asian countries (visiting or living for long periods of time in places like Sudan, South Sudan, South Africa, Pakistan, Afghanistan, the occupied Palestinian territories, Iran, Lebanon, Syria, etc.). I also had the great experience of reporting on the making of the US foreign policy from Washington DC in the late 1990s and getting near the upper echelons of the United Nations system in New York for a few years in the early 2010s.

In all these places I either witnessed, worked on or reported on extreme forms of man-made human suffering. I met survivors and murderers, interviewed bereaved women, and spoke with vengeful blood-thirsty men, got mistreated by child soldiers and looked away from the heart-rending scene of malnourished children, kept my cool and professional demeanor in the presence of frightening generals and unhinged soldiers, and broke down one or two times in a demolished refugee camp in Jenin or a children cemetery in Hirat.

Like many journalists, aid and human rights professionals, I saw how the need for security, justice, revenge, dignity, domination, protection, and peace intermingle, shape and reshape our daily lives from airports in the west to wedding parties in Yemen and Afghanistan (with all of them being targets or turned into occasions for anxiety and trepidation rather than anticipation and joy). I had slowly installed a glass barrier between my feelings and reality in order to protect myself from continual exposure to inhumanity and degradation.

In 2003, I survived an attack by a massive car bomb targeting the UN headquarters in Baghdad. The explosion, which killed over 20 of my colleagues, also cracked this barrier between myself and the scenes of abject poverty, inexplicable deaths and looming menace to which I had come so close to for many years. I went through emotional hell for many months as I stood at the brink of my abyss of dark and bloody memories, reexamining flooding scenes from a flattened refugee camp in Jenin to scary stories by former political prisoners who have been tortured in countries I lived or worked in, to encounters with displaced people in Pakistan and Iran, to quick interviews with women in Kabul, Taliban members in Kandahar, defense officials at the Pentagon, UN heads of operations in New York, and government officials in western and eastern capitals. That was when I decided to take several months off and away from such scenes to re-process and slowly submit to my emotional turmoil in order to tame my own demons. In less than a year I was back into 'action' better prepared but also believing that one never completely heals on his or her own but within the 'normal' stream of life.

Fifteen years later, this brink no longer scares me, nor do horrifying unfolding events around us; they

do not egg me for revenge or rudderless indignation (at least not beyond the first few human hours of justifiable anger). I still experience a sense of impotence sometimes, but I quickly channel this into something useful for myself or people around me focusing my contributions on small civil organizations working in the fields of rights, aid and advocacy. I take occasional depression attacks and waves of sadness as signs of my own humanity and healthy vulnerability. I no longer believe in an innate good or an ingrained bad nature of humans. There, however, remains a sense of an ethical and moral world that we all should strive for. I believe in the power of empathy and the virtues of compassion, and think, despite all the mayhem around us, that we can become what we work for, collectively. For me, this means at both individual and communal levels that one group or an individual's security does not come from the insecurity of others and that most of the threats, communities or states face, can be largely addressed not by barriers (glass or otherwise) from behind which one can send drones or missiles or barrel bombs but through genuine and creative engagement. Yes, at one time or another you may need to use force, but there are huge distances and many compromises to be covered/made before that decision must be taken.

The most important challenge is to redefine what is our security? What do we want to secure? Against whom? And why? And what does the other (that menace and source of insecurity) want from us? And is there any sense in what they are demanding? Can we talk? Can we compromise? What is non-negotiable? What can we share? And who are the 'we' that we seek to defend?

The increasing inequalities, oppression, humiliation, and erosion of commonalities within and among countries are, for me, the primary cause for fueling anger, insecurity, and alienation. Ultimately, these forces push millions of people into the hands of violent groups or institutions that seek revenge, security, domination and/or forcing their way of life on others often under the pretext of saving them or serving a higher purpose. This is a world of rationality of means and utter irrationality of ends.

Reams of studies and articles would claim that people around the globe are becoming populist, more protectionist, even chauvinist and nativist. They are bent on ensuring security for themselves and their own. If they have functioning systems of justice and some minimum social and economic rights, then all of that is for their own kith and kin to enjoy while not only shutting away others but even going as far as justifying inhuman and extrajudicial measures against them to allegedly protect their own privileges and entitlements. A recent [study](#) by Counterpoint has shown that for example in the UK is influenced by dominant frames of thinking that demonize the 'other.' Such thinking is deployed through the media and other public channels.

In the British press, the study found that there was a “substantial opposition ... to applying the fundamental principles of human rights to everyone; instead, minority groups such as foreigners, criminals or prisoners were regularly presented as undeserving of human rights protections”. Let us

assume the media deployed other frameworks of looking at the world which support and nurture equality, social justice and human rights, I would agree with the study, that this could possibly end into more “support for the values and principles that underpin” universal human rights.

Despite the dominance of neoliberalism in our planet, I still believe that the challenge is to convince more people that social and economic rights do not stop at borders and that the other, who is not protected as a citizen of the country, and also that other who belongs to a minority in your own country, needs to be included in one form or another. Until this is satisfactorily done there will be neither durable peace nor genuine security.

The same evening of that frightening experience in the UN offices in Beirut, I agreed to a request from a TV channel to attend a live group interview in the public square in front of our offices. The station and the anchor who was pro-Hizbollah bussed in about 20 people from different families who had lost loved ones under Israeli raids in the previous few days. It was tense, confusing, and made probably worse by the anchor grandstanding and inciting comments. At one stage, he looked at a 70-something year old father and asked him, “what do you have to tell the international community?” pointing at me. The man, who had lost his son, barely spoke two words and then started to choke on his tears. The sensationalist anchor was fired up. It is good TV after all. He looked at me and said, “so what is your answer?” I just stood up and walked across to the old man, helped him to his feet, hugged him tight and walked him away -- slowly away from the flood lights for a short private conversation. This may sound melodramatic to some, and dreamy to others, but it is this man and his harrowing loss, and many women and men like him, are what inspire me and many like me in our ceaseless search for genuine common security. It is because of him and his son whom I never met that I remain committed, that I continue to struggle in my own small ways for social justice and for us to reconstruct a humanity in which people are more empathetic and freer to realize their own collective and individual potentials. In my everyday work, I try to translate this into working with individuals and organizations that advocate in concrete ways for such an existence and in small steps. I always remember this bereaved man from south Lebanon and many like him that I met from Darfur to Mazar-i-Sharif and from Juba to Berlin. I know quite well whose interests I am pushing and why, because without empathy and the power of compassion we end up in-securing each other and adding more fuel to an engulfing fire.

*Khaled Mansour is an Egyptian writer who has worked as a journalist, aid worker, peace-keeper, human rights advocate, and a professor in African and Asian countries and in the United States for the past 30 years.