Positive Peace in the Middle East

David Boersema

Pacific University

Recommended Citation
Boersema, David, "Positive Peace in the Middle East" (2011). All CAS Faculty Scholarship. 52.
https://commons.pacificu.edu/casfac/52
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Disciplines
Arts and Humanities

Comments
Paper presented at the 2011 annual meeting of the Concerned Philosophers for Peace (Austin, TX).

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Positive Peace in the Middle East

David Boersema
Pacific University

Abstract:

Drawing on the work of peace theorist Johan Galtung, I will suggest in this talk that real peace in the Middle East can be achieved only by addressing what Galtung has identified as six dimensions of violence: (1) physical vs. non-physical violence, (2) negative vs. positive aspects of violence, (3) who/what is the object of violence, (4) who/what is the subject of violence, (5) intended vs. unintended violence, and (6) manifest vs. latent violence. However, I will also argue that Galtung's dimensions are not adequate to produce positive peace. The thesis herein, then, is modest: a necessary condition for positive peace in the Middle East is the recognition and respect of personal and group identities.

1. Introduction

The first decade of the 21st century saw a generational change in governmental leadership in a number of countries in the Middle East: Jordan’s King Hussain, who had ruled since 1952, died in 1999, as did Morocco’s King Hassan II. In 2000 Hafez al-Asad, leader of Syria for more than two decades, died. In 2003 Iraq’s Saddam Hussein was overthrown by the United States (along with Coalition forces), after he had ruled the country since the late 1970s. This was followed in 2004 by the death of Sheikh Zayad bin Sultan al-Nahyan in the UAE, who had ruled since the country’s founding in 1971. In the same year Palestine’s Yasir Arafat died, after having led the PLO (and later, the Palestinian
Authority) for more than three decades. At the beginning of this year, 2011, Tunisia’s Zene bin Ali was driven from office, after holding power since the 1980s, as was Egypt’s Hosni Mubarek, following a 30-year run as that country’s president, and, most recently, Libya’s Moamar Qadhafi, in power since 1969. Protests in Yemen led to the resignation of its president, Salih, and protests in Bahrain have led to military responses there by the leadership against civilian protesters. Even in Syria, long thought to be rather immune to civil protest ever since Hafez-al-Asad’s bloody crackdown on protests in the early 1980s, open challenges to Bashir Asad point to it being the latest bloom of the Arab Spring (at the time of this writing, November 2011).

While some of these transitions that have occurred over the past decade or so have been peaceful (for example, neither Zayad’s nor the elder Asad’s deaths were the result of violence or being ousted), they nonetheless mark a generational transition. This transition is not necessarily one that will not result in a new generation of long-lasting political leaders. For example, King Muhammad VI has ruled Morocco since his father’s death in 1999, as has Jordan’s King Abdullah II. (In addition, although his regime is presently undergoing severe unrest, Syria’s Bashir Asad has ruled since 2000.) For that matter, although the individuals have been varied, as opposed to a single person, Israel’s government has, for the most part, been right-of-center since Menachim Begin and the Likud Party took office in the late 1970s. Likewise, with the plausible suggestion of the exception of Mohammad Khatami from 1997-2005, Iran’s government has been relatively unchanged since its 1979 Islamic Revolution. All of this is to say that at the beginning of the 21st century, a generation of peoples in the Middle East was accustomed to living under long-standing political regimes and personages.
Many young people, in particular, at the beginning of this current century, are calling out for a change in living conditions, with some – although not all – of that calling for change including a change in political leadership and structure. The call is less directly for change in political leadership and more for political reform (or for change in political leadership as a means of political reform), with the real goal being an enhancement of people’s everyday lives and opportunities. For instance, while there was a loud cry for the removal of bin Ali in Tunisia and for Mubarek in Egypt, there has been very little cry for the removal of, say Qabus ibn Said in Oman, even though he has ruled there since 1970. Nor are their sustained protests against the al-Thani family in Qatar, even though this sheikhdom has been in place for decades, nor any significant protests against the Saud family in Saudi Arabia. With this claim that it is the enhancement of everyday lives and opportunities that is the goal, and change in political leadership that is seen as a means to that goal, I want to speak about the concept of positive peace and then relate that concept to matters of the Middle East.

2. Positive Peace and Galtung’s Dimensions of Peace

Sadly, peace is typically taken to be a “secondary” concept, a derivative of the more primary concept of violence. That is to say, “peace” is typically defined as the absence of violence, rather than the other way around. Peace theorists have long spoken of peace as the absence of violence in a variety of ways. For example, they have distinguished between organized violence and unorganized violence, with peace subsequently defined along those terms. Organized violence, of course, includes war, whether between States or within them. Unorganized violence includes such direct, physical, personal violence as
interpersonal killings, assaults, rapes, abuse, etc. The term “negative peace” is used, then, to speak of a state of affairs in which there is an absence of such violence, whether it is organized or unorganized. For instance, some would claim that, say, Canada is at peace today because it is not at war (that is, it is not engaged in organized violence). Others, however, claim that Canada is not really at peace because, although, yes, it is not explicitly at war with any other State, there still exists plenty of unorganized violence there. Not being openly at war, then, might be one form (or perhaps, let’s say, a necessary condition) for Canada to experience negative peace, it is not sufficient, because there is still a level of unorganized violence in Canada so that full negative peace does not exist there.

As we all know, however, there are other forms of violence besides and beyond direct, physical, personal violence. There are also indirect forms of violence that either shorten the life span of persons (or moral agents and patients) or that indirectly reduce the quality of life for them. There might be, for instance, social or economic structures in place that harm – directly or indirectly – the quality of life of persons. This could be organized, in the sense of, say, restrictions of civil liberties or civil freedoms, or it could be unorganized in the sense of, say, a culture of racism or social practices that curtail opportunities for some persons. The term “positive peace” is used when speaking of the absence of these forms and types of indirect violence.

Underlying these two types or notions of peace – that is, negative peace and positive peace – are the works of the noted Norwegian peace theorist Johann Galtung. As a point of departure in speaking of peace, Galtung defines “violence” as a state in which “human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations
are below their potential realizations.” Peace, then, would be a state in which those potentials are actualized. This definition, or at least characterization, is the underpinning of the earlier notions of negative peace and positive peace. For Galtung, one’s potentials are not realized, perhaps not even capable of being realized, in the context of war or other direct, physical violence. In addition, they are not realized, or perhaps even capable of being realized, in the context of indirect violence. People are not at peace if they are threatened, intimidated, inappropriately discriminated against, barred from economic or educational opportunities, etc. any more than they are not at peace if they are physically attacked, for Galtung.

In addition to identifying violence as the differential between one’s potentials and one’s realizations, Galtung spells out six dimensions of violence that he claims can comprise this differential. One dimension is that of physical and non-physical (what he specifically identifies as psychological) violence. We all know that threats can be just as effective at times as actual attacks in influencing someone’s behavior and actions. If a schoolyard bully can acquire another child’s lunch money with a threat rather than with actually hitting and taking the money, the result is the same and the victim is just as much a victim (and, for Galtung, is just as much lacking in being at peace). The second dimension of violence, for Galtung, is what he calls a negative vs. positive approach to influence. This is his way of speaking about negative vs. positive reinforcement, with negative reinforcement being punishment and positive reinforcement being reward. As with threats vs. attacks, rewards for “good” behavior (or policies) can bring about the same result as punishment for “bad” behavior. If the “good” behavior is in fact behavior
that promotes (or fails to reduce) the differential between one’s potentials and one’s realizations, then that person, for Galtung, is not fully at peace.

A third dimension of violence focuses on whether or not there is an object that can be hurt. No one need actually be hurt for there to be a state of violence. Again, in cases of threats, no actual harm need occur for relevant agents to be subject to violence. Galtung remarks that “the famous balance of power doctrine is based on efforts to obtain precisely this effect.” His fourth dimension is the flip side of the third; it focuses on whether or not there is a subject that acts to cause the violence. There might well be no specific actor or agent that causes the harm, even though harm is caused. For instance, economic structures and practices might well result in specific persons or groups being disadvantaged (and, hence, harmed in a way) without anyone (again, whether specific person or group) orchestrating the disadvantage. As Galtung puts it: if people are starving, violence is experienced, whether or not someone is trying to starve them.

Directly related to this concern is Galtung’s fifth dimension of violence, namely, intended vs. unintended violence. As Marx said (yes, it was Marx!): the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Some violence is and can be intended; other violence is and can happen even when not intended. Finally, for Galtung, there is manifest and latent violence. Manifest, of course, is open, recognizable violence. Latent violence, on the other hand, is not open or directly recognized. As we all know, the prevalence, say, of biases or stereotypes, can be latent yet harmful.

If, then, we take peace to be – as Galtung does – the state in which one’s potentials are in fact realized, then these dimensions of violence are meant to point out ways in which those potentials can be barred or obstructed or otherwise not met. How
does his characterization of peace, along with these dimensions of violence, play out when looking at the Middle East today? Can there be positive peace in the Middle East?

3. Positive Peace in the Middle East

We are all well aware of the organized violence in the Middle East. Iraq has been at war, essentially since 1980; first, in its eight-year war against Iran, followed immediately by the first U.S.-led conflict in the beginning of the 1990s, up to today. Since the creation of the modern state of Israel in the late 1940s (and, indeed, prior to that), armed conflict between Israel and neighboring Arab states, as well as with Palestinians, has been virtually non-stop for the past sixty years. Over the past several decades Lebanon has experienced a civil war, as has Algeria, as has Yemen.

However, the recent uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and elsewhere are as much about unrealized living conditions and opportunities as they are about direct, physical violence perpetrated by their governmental leaders. We do not hear of widespread unrest and angry protests in, say, the UAE or Qatar, even though these sheikhdoms are no more politically democratic (in the Western sense) than are Egypt or Algeria or Jordan. It is economic conditions of life – the rising costs of everyday commodities and the lack of opportunities for economic improvement, often because of structural, governmental corruption and cronyism – that are generating much (I would claim, most) of the unrest in the region. For example, according to the CIA Factbook (with data from the end of 2010), the per capita GDP for Algeria was $7300 USD, for Egypt $6200, for Syria $4800, for Yemen $2700, for Gaza $900. This compares to the United States figure of $47,200. (On
the other hand, the GDP for Bahrain was $40,300, for Kuwait was $48,900, for the UAE was $49,600, and for Qatar was $179,000; for Saudi Arabia it was $24,200.

Unemployment in the region for most of the countries (other than the Gulf countries of Qatar, UAE, Kuwait) were in the double digits, up to 35% in Yemen. It is less direct, physical violence, then, and more indirect absence of quality of life concerns for many in the region, especially the younger generation. This is not to say that they do not also live and feel the results of direct violence (e.g., Gaza).

What about Galtung’s dimensions? His first dimension was physical vs. non-physical violence. Examples of this abound, but they are not universal across the region. For instance, the web of Israeli checkpoints throughout the West Bank, along with the difficulties they cause for simple daily travel, are only one example of what Palestinians see as emotional, psychological, and “spiritual” intimidation and humiliation they must endure every day. The presence and expansion of the Israeli Security Fence, including across lands that are not within the internationally-recognized 1967 borders, is another example (along with other land they see as illegally and immorally confiscated). The current young generation has known nothing but these conditions.

Galtung’s second dimension of violence was that of negative vs. positive reinforcement. Mubarek’s offer to name a vice-president, after thirty years of not having one, was a concession that he made to protesters. Although it was seen as a sham, it was an attempt to alter behavior with positive reinforcement. Israel’s stance of working with Fatah and its leader Abbas (while refusing to negotiate with Hamas) is seen as playing both positive and negative reinforcement for those respective parties.
The third dimension of violence for Galtung was whether or not there was an object that was actually hurt. For many across the Middle East, it is the disenfranchisement and dismissal of groups that constitutes much of what they experience as lack of peace. This has had ethnic overtones, such as the treatment of Kurds in Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and Iran. It has had religious overtones, as Islamist groups in Egypt, Algeria, and other countries have claimed. Some Western-oriented, pro-democracy groups have made the same claim vis-à-vis political Islamic power structures (that is, they have objected to, say, certain forms of imposition of shariah law).

Paralleling this dimension is Galtung’s fourth, which was whether or not there was a subject (that is, active agent) perpetrating the violence, or whether it was structural. Much of the present unrest and protest by the youth is that the problems and difficulties are in large part structural. Corruption and cronyism are seen by many as rampant; traditional practices and values are seen by many (again, especially among the young) as obstructive.

Galtung’s fifth dimension of violence speaks to intended vs. unintended violence. Recent polls show that, again, a major concern among many in the region is the failure of their leaders to provide conditions for a reasonable quality of everyday life. It is not intended, direct violence that is the major well of most of the unrest; it is the lack of resources and opportunities available for mundane, daily quality of life. A Brookings Institute poll that was conducted in July 2010 showed that across the region, and, interestingly, across generations, people in the Middle East saw lack of opportunity for self-improvement as a major concern and complaint. (Web page: [http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2010/0805_arab_opinion_poll_telhami.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2010/0805_arab_opinion_poll_telhami.aspx))
Finally, Galtung’s sixth dimension of violence focused on manifest vs. latent conditions. Examples of manifest violence (both specific and structural) abound, involving both domestic and international sources. We are all aware of the cases of open hostility between Sunni and Shia, of armed repression of citizens by the military and political rulers and regimes in the region, not to mention military strikes and occupation by foreign powers in some areas. But, even more, much of the recent uprising that has swept the region speaks to the more latent conditions of violence: corruption, cronyism, intimidation, threats, failure of opportunity, etc. It is not mystery and it is no secret that these forms of violence are as real and as destructive as more manifest forms.

This recognition of latent forms of violence can be, and has been, played out by leaders in the area. One telling example of this was a remark made during the Iranian Revolution of 1978/79. Ayatollah Khomeini had long complained of what he saw as the negative influences of western culture in Iran and one of his followers noted that “the Beatles are more dangerous than bombs.” The message was clear: social and cultural values that are seen as negative and even destructive are a form of latent violence.

4. Missing dimensions

In spite of what I think is right about Galtung’s understanding and analysis of peace and violence, I think his catalog of dimensions are inadequate, at least in the sense of being incomplete, to account for violence in the Middle East. In addition, I want to make clear that what I have been claiming is not simply that economic hardships are the sole cause of violence in the Middle East (or elsewhere, for that matter). Indeed, a great deal of violence is perpetrated by those who do not suffer economic hardship! What I have been
saying, however, is that the Arab Spring has sprung not merely as an effort to replace political dictatorships with western-style political democracies. The countries that have seen the lowest levels of social protest during the Arab Spring have, in fact, been the Gulf monarchies. This is not, I believe, because they have engaged in or even threatened severe retaliation for social protest, but because most of the citizens in those countries have not felt disenfranchised and have not endured economic hardships. This is not at all to say that there are not social, political, or even economic concerns related to those countries, but it is to say (again) that the drive for a particular form of political statehood is what underlies the Arab Spring.

What is driving the Arab Spring, I want to say, is a desire for positive peace, along the various dimensions of peace that Galtung outlines. However, I would like to add a further dimension of positive peace that I believe Galtung omits. It is the recognition and respect of identity, particularly group identity. The Sunni/Shia conflicts, for example, are not theological and are not ideological, except in the most trivial sense. They are no more theological than are the conflicts between Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants. Rather, they are much more about group identity and the opportunities for a flourishing life that goes hand-in-hand with social structures and attitudes associated with group identity. Are Kurds Kurds or are they Iraqis? Under Saddam they were treated as Kurds, as others, so being Kurdish mattered more than being Iraqi. Does being Shia in Bahrain matter (that is, in a country where the ruling family is Sunni although the majority of citizens are Shia)? Well, it matters when and if being Shia means being treated in particularly negative ways, when goods and services and opportunities are not distributed fairly or equitably – or at least not perceived as being distributed fairly or
equitably. So, it is less, I think, just a matter of political structure and more a matter of social opportunity and respect that drive the perceptions and realities of peace and violence – not only in the Middle East, but everywhere. As long as people believe that they are treated fairly and have a reasonable hope for achieving their aspirations, the form of their political structures will be non-controversial for them. And while economic well-being is fundamental, its balance with fair and respectful treatment is even moreso. (As an analogy: One cares about substantive justice, but also about procedural justice. One might want distributive equality, but one can accept distributive inequalities as long as they result from a fair and open process. For example, only one person can win the lottery, but as long as all players believe that the process for selecting the winner is fair and open, the resulting distributive inequality is acceptable. Likewise, only one team can win the World Series in a given year, but as long as the officiating is fair and open, the result is acceptable.) As long as Jordanians or Bahrainis or Palestinians (or whomever) believe that they are treated fairly, in the sense that their well-being is not ignored or jeopardized by a system of unfair rules, then they will see their respective political (and economic) regimes and structures as legitimate. Galtung is right to insist on genuine peace as being framed in terms of the realizations of potentialities, but such realizations will occur only when respect for persons is taken as the core basis for flourishing. It is an old saw, but it bears repeating: Social justice is the key to conflict resolution and to genuine peace. A necessary component of social justice is a recognition and respect for salient identities.