

COMMENTARY

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The Global Crisis of Leadership

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A question often raised is: are leaders a reflection of their time, or are they individuals who rise to answer the call of the hour? History has shown that many have risen to the occasion out of strong moral conviction. The events and the circumstances at the time were such that acting or failing to act had colossal implications of such magnitude that changed the course of history.

We certainly are living in a period of unprecedented global trials. Violent extremism is spreading, poverty and despair are pervasive, fear, uncertainty, and hopelessness reign, and existential threats such as nuclear proliferation and ominous environmental disasters are looming.

But then we feel comfortably numb, oblivious to our own surroundings as if the gathering storm will dissipate on its own and somehow we will be spared and survive.

We have yet to find any leader, and I challenge anyone to name one, who can rise to meet these awesome challenges we face today. A leader who stands above human frailty, shortcomings, and failings. Leaders with courage but who are not reckless, with vision but in tune with reality, undeterred by any obstacle, and who are willing to even die for a cause in which they believe.

Undeniably, we are witnessing a dearth of leadership reflecting our state of affairs and conditions nearly everywhere.

The complacent are resigned to the status quo, the indifferent do not care, the delusional keep fantasizing, the politicians are busy manipulating, and the power hungry lie and cheat to cling to their positions.

The young are restless, as exemplified by the Arab Spring and in so many other places, not knowing what the future holds. The old are despairing, counting their remaining days; the rich want to be richer, global wealth is controlled in the hands of the few, and the poor have no place left to go.

Religious authorities preach the gospel of morality that they don't practice. And the best and brightest, who could rise and lead, do not want to dirty their hands in political deeds.

Where are the leaders who must rise to answer the call at this critical juncture? As John Quincy Adams is attributed as saying: "If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader."

Leaders like Prime Minister Churchill, who displayed an iron resolve, faced down Nazi Germany and won, and the whole world triumphed with him.

Yitzhak Rabin, who recognized the inevitability of Israeli-Palestinian coexistence, was right 23 years ago and he would be right today. He extended his hand in peace and concluded the 1993 Oslo Accords, and died for what he believed in.

Egypt's President Anwar Sadat demonstrated a stately courage; he was the first Arab leader to recognize more than 40 years ago that Israel is here to stay and was killed for making peace. He was right then and he would be right again now.

President Abraham Lincoln, who fought to preserve the Union against the Confederacy (at the cost of nearly one million American lives), put America on the path to a greatness unmatched by any other in the history of nations.

"I am not bound to win," Lincoln is attributed to have said, "but I am bound to be true. I am not bound to succeed, but I am bound to live up to what light I have."

Nelson Mandela bravely chose truth and reconciliation instead of senseless revenge and retribution. His example demonstrates that it is possible to reconcile between the oppressed and the oppressor.

As David Foster Wallace said, real leaders are people who "help us overcome the limitations of our own individual selfishness and weakness and fear and get us to do better, harder things than we can get ourselves to do on our own."

But look at our sorry array of leaders today, among so many others worldwide, who deserve nothing but scorn and shame:

Russian President Putin, whose hunger for ever more power is surpassed only by his corrupt and insatiable greed, when the Russian economy is in tatters and the people suffer from his dictatorial outbursts and imperialist dreams.

He could have made Russia an integral part of the European community, and together lifted the continent to new heights that neither could achieve on their own.

President Erdogan of Turkey, whose religious zealotry and blatant compromises of human rights are depriving the people of freedom and destroying his country piece by piece.

Instead, he sadly forfeited a momentous opportunity to create a successful model of an Islamic democracy that would have had an enormous impact on the Arab world, especially in the wake of the Arab Spring.

Prime Minister Netanyahu, who made demagoguery a form of art and whose ideological zeal robs the Israelis and Palestinians alike of peace which they cherish and need.

He fails to grasp that an Israeli-Palestinian peace could usher in a renaissance to the region accompanied by a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace, and literally change the course of history.

President Bush, who waged a reckless war in Iraq—a war of choice that turned the region into an inferno and set a vicious sectarian war in motion with no end in sight.

Imagine, what would have been the difference if the more than two trillion dollars wasted on a senseless war were instead spent on our crumbling infrastructure and aiding hundreds of debilitating communities living in abject poverty and squalor.

Ayatollah Khamenei, who executes and tortures his people while robbing them of their dignity and natural right to be free. He sends money, materials, and manpower to fuel Assad's killing machine, all in the name of God.

Instead, he could have utilized the splendour of Iran's riches in human and natural resources and played a leading constructive regional role to promote stability, progress, and peace.

Although President Obama falls in an entirely different category—he restored to the Presidency the dignity and the stature it deserves, and demonstrated unwavering commitment to human rights—he never appreciated the US' indispensable global role to lead.

Instead, he led from behind, creating the perception of weakness and vacillation allowing other powers, especially Russia and Iran, to fill the vacuum he created, raising serious doubts in the minds of America's allies whether the US is still up to the task.

With the lack of global leadership, is there any wonder then why the civil war in Syria killed 300,000 and left much of the country in ruin while the world's leaders failed miserably to end the slaughter?

Is it any wonder why the Sunni-Shiite conflict continues to devour the lives of tens of thousands of innocent people, knowing that this war is unwinnable and the only choice is to live with one another?

Is it any wonder why after five decades of Israeli occupation, the Palestinians fight between themselves and against Israel? Both sides have still to come to their senses and realize that only peaceful coexistence can ensure their mutual survival.

Is it any wonder why violent extremism is on the rise, why the young are radicalized, and why there is little prospect for better days ahead? As long as leadership remains absent on the international scene, we can tragically expect much of the same.

Yes, leaders are a reflection of their time, and people the world over might have finally reached the breaking point.

Their cry for trusting, caring, and bold leadership echoes everywhere. We can only hope that such leaders will hear the people's outcry and emerge to answer their desperate call.

Note: This article was originally published in the web portal of Prof. Ben-Meir and has been reproduced under arrangement. Web Link: <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/the-global-crisis-of-leadership/>

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