

With wrenching tragedies only a few miles away, and still worse catastrophes perhaps not far removed, it may seem wrong, perhaps even cruel, to shift attention to what may seem to be more abstract prospects, uncertain ones, but ones that might offer a path to a better world – and not in the remote future.

I've visited Lebanon several times, moments of great hope, and also of despair, tinged with remarkable determination to overcome and to move forward. The first time I visited – if that's the right word – was exactly 60 years ago, almost to the day. My wife and I were hiking in Israel's northern Galilee one evening, when a jeep drove by on a road near us and someone called out that we should turn back: we're in the wrong country. We had, inadvertently, crossed the border, then unmarked, now I suppose bristling with lethal armaments.

A minor event, but it brought home forcefully a lesson that I knew, but perhaps not clearly enough. The legitimacy of borders – for that matter of states – is at best conditional and temporary. Neither have inherent legitimacy. Almost all borders have been imposed and maintained by violence, and are quite arbitrary. The Lebanon-Israel border was established in the interests of British and French imperial power, with no concern for the humans who happened to live there, or even the terrain. It makes no sense, which is why it was so easy to cross unwittingly.

Surveying the terrible conflicts in the world, almost all are the residue of imperial crimes and the borders they drew in their own interests. To take just one of many, Pashtuns have never accepted the legitimacy of the Durand line, drawn by Britain to separate Pakistan from Afghanistan; nor has any Afghan government ever accepted it. It is in the interests of today's imperial powers that Pashtuns crossing it are labeled "terrorists" so that their homes are subjected to murderous attack by drones and special forces under President Obama's global terrorist campaign. Much the same is true worldwide.

There are few borders in the world so heavily guarded by sophisticated technology, and so subject to impassioned domestic rhetoric, as the border separating Mexico from the United States, two countries with amicable diplomatic relations. The border was as usual established by violent aggression, the most wicked war in history, in the words of General Ulysses S. Grant, later President, who fought in it as a young officer. The border was fairly open until 1994, when President Clinton initiated Operation Gatekeeper, militarizing it. Before, people had regularly

crossed to see relatives and friends. It is likely that Operation Gatekeeper was motivated by another event in that year, imposition of NAFTA, the mislabeled “free trade agreement” – and the term “imposition” is accurate since the populations of the participating countries were opposed. Doubtless the administration understood that Mexican farmers, however efficient they might be, cannot compete with highly subsidized US agribusiness, and that Mexican businesses cannot compete with US multinationals, which must receive “national treatment” in Mexico under the NAFTA rules. That would almost inevitably lead to a flood of refugees across the border, joining those who to this day are fleeing from the ravages of Reagan’s murderous wars in Central America in the 1980s.

There are indications of erosion of borders and the cruel hatreds and conflicts they symbolize and inspire. The most dramatic case is Europe. For centuries, Europe was the most savage region in the world, torn by hideous and destructive wars. In the 17th-century Thirty Years War alone perhaps a third of the population of Germany was wiped out. It was during these years of horror that Europe developed the technology and the culture of war that enabled it to conquer the world. After a final burst of indescribable savagery, the mutual destruction came to an end in 1945. Scholarship attributes that outcome to the thesis of democratic peace, but one major factor surely was that Europeans by then understood that they had developed such capacities for destruction that the next time they played their favorite game of slaughtering one another would be the last. The closer integration that has developed since is not without serious problems, as we see right now, but it is a vast improvement over what came before.

A similar outcome would hardly be strange for this region, which until recently was essentially borderless. And it is happening, though in awful ways. Syria’s seemingly inexorable plunge to suicide is tearing the country apart. And there is reason to take seriously the prediction of veteran Middle East correspondent Patrick Cockburn that the conflagration and its regional impact may lead to the end of the Sykes-Picot regime imposed a century ago by Britain and France. The Syrian civil war has reignited the Sunni-Shia conflict that was one of the most terrible consequences of the US-UK invasion of Iraq ten years ago – and we should never forget that the Nuremberg judgment, which forms a core part of modern international law, described aggression as the “supreme international crime,” differing from other war crimes in that it encompasses all of the evil that followed. The Kurdish regions of Iraq and now Syria are moving towards autonomy and linkages. Many analysts now predict that a Kurdish state may be established before a Palestinian state. If Palestine ever does gain independence in something like the terms of the overwhelming international consensus, it is likely that its borders with Israel will erode through normal processes of commercial and cultural

interchange, as had begun to happen in the past during periods of relative calm. Anyone familiar with Mandatory Palestine knows well how artificial and disruptive any partition must be.

That development could be a step towards closer regional integration, and perhaps slow disappearance of the artificial border cutting the Galilee between Israel and Lebanon, so hikers and others could do what we did 60 years ago. Without pursuing details, this seems to me to offer the only realistic hope for some partial resolution of the plight of Palestinian refugees, now only one of the refugee disasters tormenting the region since the invasion of Iraq and Syria's descent into hell.

Blurring of borders and challenges to the legitimacy of states bring to the fore serious questions about who owns the earth. Who owns the global atmosphere that is being polluted by the heat-trapping gasses that have now "passed a long-feared milestone, . . . reaching a concentration not seen on the earth for millions of years," with awesome potential consequences, so we learned a month ago? Or to adopt the phrase used by indigenous people throughout much of the world, who will defend the earth? Who will uphold the rights of nature? Who will adopt the role of stewards of the commons, our collective possession? That the earth now desperately needs defense from impending environmental catastrophe is surely obvious to any rational and literate person. The differential reactions to the crisis are a most remarkable feature of current history. In the forefront of the defense of nature are those called "primitive": indigenous, tribal, First Nations in Canada, aboriginal in Australia, and in general the remnants who have survived the imperial onslaught. In the forefront of the assault on nature are those who call themselves the most advanced and civilized, the richest and most powerful nations.

The struggle to defend the commons takes many forms. In microcosm, it is taking place right now in Taksim Square, where brave men and women are protecting the last remnants of the commons of Istanbul from the wrecking ball of commercialization and gentrification and autocratic rule that is destroying this ancient treasure. As the mainstream press has come to recognize, theirs is "the cry of those who want to have their voices heard, who want to have a say in how they are governed." The conflict over the remnants of the commons is "about control versus freedom. . . . What's at stake is more than a square. It's the soul of a nation."

Given Turkey's prominence, the outcome of the struggle is sure to have a large impact on others throughout the region. But even more than that: the defenders of Taksim Square today are at the forefront of a worldwide struggle to defend the global commons from the ravages of that same wrecking ball – a struggle in which

we must all take part, with dedication and resolve, if there is any hope for decent human survival in a world that has no borders, and is our common possession, to defend or to destroy.