

COMMENTARY

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First step toward peace is for more to demand it

One of the greatest impediments to that elusive goal of "world peace" is the inability to break the stalemate between the Israelis and Palestinians, as well as the latter's Arab supporters.

If you think this issue isn't "local" enough to be important to you, think again. As Israel's closest ally, billions of U.S. tax dollars are used to support Israel's economy and military. And that support is used by Israel's enemies to make us their enemies as they plot future wars and terrorist attacks.

I prefer to write columns about issues a bit closer to home than the Middle East, but I recently read a book by Eau Claire author Cathy Sultan titled "Tragedy in South Lebanon: The Israeli-Hezbollah War of 2006." Sultan, her Lebanese husband and two small children lived in Beirut during the Lebanese civil war that began in 1975. This is her third book about the turmoil in the Mideast.

Delving into this issue with my extremely limited knowledge is risky, but I think it's important for Americans to try to learn more

about the problems and possible solutions in that part of the world because of the possible ramifications of doing nothing.

It's not hard to understand why the Palestinians are bitter and the Arab world feels they got a raw deal. By one estimate there are nearly 1.5 million Palestinian refugees in various camps in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Gaza and the West Bank. Refugee camps were established after the 1948 Arab-Israeli War to accommodate Palestinian refugees who fled from the fighting.

Now regardless of your views on this issue, how would you feel if your ancestors were resettled in a refugee camp in 1948, and in 2008 some of those camps still exist and most of the people living in them are extremely poor? First, you'd be angry. Second, you'd be desperate. Third, at some point suicide or some other form of death in a long-term effort to change your children's prospects wouldn't seem so far-fetched. If your plight hasn't changed in 60 years, why believe it ever will change?

Israelis, on the other hand,

haven't forgotten the Holocaust, and they are determined not to let their guard down, lest their enemies see their vulnerability as an invitation to strike again and destroy Israel. The Israelis feel they have made reasonable efforts to resolve this stalemate through the years, but as the late Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban famously once said, the "Arabs never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity" for peace.

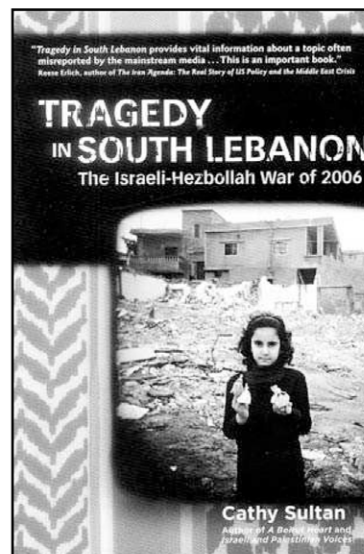
But the Israelis likewise may have missed an opportunity in 1995, when then-Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by a radical right-wing Orthodox Jew who opposed the signing of the Oslo Accords. Rabin actually had shaken hands with Palestinian Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat two years earlier after Arafat renounced violence and recognized Israel.

But hopes to build on that momentum ended with Rabin's death, and now we're pretty much back to the same old song.

Sultan says she knows from her many interviews and travels to the



Sultan



Contributed photo

"Tragedy in South Lebanon: The Israeli-Hezbollah War of 2006," published last month, is the third book about the Mideast written by Eau Claire author Cathy Sultan.

Mideast that many people, both Palestinians and Israelis, don't believe the leadership on either side is going out of its way to find a peaceful solution. Clearly that solution has to include a free, independent

Palestinian state that recognizes Israel's right to exist and renounces violence. Israel also has to recognize the Palestinians' right to live in a real country, not scrounging for life's basics in refugee camps under the thumb of its militarily superior neighbor. And if so many people on both sides truly yearn for peace, they must make their voices heard.

Sultan in her book quoted an Israeli soldier about the prospects for peace.

"I am young and don't want to spend my whole life preparing for war," he told Sultan. "In Israel we have a war mentality. We never seem to talk about peace. ... I am ready to live in peace with my neighbors. I think Hezbollah would do the same. Why aren't our leaders willing to take the leap?"

Maybe they don't want to end up like Rabin. Or maybe each side thinks the other can't be trusted to negotiate with sincerity and make good on promises. And so the next generation comes along, learns to hate and distrust with more intensity than the generation before, and the beat goes on.

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