**Ending the war in Ukraine**

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Asalam-o-Alaikum, Salama, and Shalom are known greetings—the first is in Arabic, to include the whole Muslim world, indeed also Pakistan; the second, ‘Salama’, is in Kiswahili, the language used by people in East and Southern Africa; and ‘Shalom’ is the Jewish greeting used in Israel long before that state was created, in the land where the cradle of Christianity stood. I carried out fieldwork and research in Tanzania in late-1970s and early-1980s, and I was lucky to welcome my supervisor from the University of Oslo, Education Professor Eva Nordland, on a visit to Tanzania. She was chairing a group of women academics, who opposed the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan, which began on the last day of 1979 and lasted for a decade. She was so fascinated about coming to Tanzania, where people greeted each other by the word ‘Peace’, Salama, or, ‘Asalam-o-alikum’, ‘Peace be with you’, as is the full Arabic version of the greeting.

The Russian and Ukrainian word for peace is ‘Mir’ and ‘Myr’, used in the land of the Russian aggressor, and the smaller Ukrainian victim; they are relatives and neighbours; most of them are also Eastern Orthodox Christians, just now many are observing fast, Lent. In the last couple of hundred years, they have been separate countries, or part of other countries, and sometimes one country, often with quite some Russian influence, and sometimes, Polish and other. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Ukraine became an independent country in 1991, inter alia, giving up its nuclear weapons.

From 2008, Russia has more clearly than earlier stressed that Ukraine must remain neutral, alliance-free, demilitarised, and a buffer between the Russian sphere of influence and that of Europe and the US—as long as such ‘blocs’ still exist. This was spelt out at the NATO Bucharest Summit in 2008. It was made clear that Ukraine should be excluded from becoming a NATO member, or a close partner, earlier also in the Ukraine’s constitution. In future, it could perhaps become a member of the EU, yet, maintaining most trade with Russia and its neighbours. We must never forget the US’ international position, having some 800 military bases in 80 countries around the world, and that much of its cooperation with and presence abroad, is actually a way of drawing other countries closer to America in all fields, not only spreading democracy and increasing trade, as it says.

Alas, after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine three weeks ago, serious discussions about a peaceful settlement of the mentioned issues have been put on hold—although Russia, Ukraine, other neighbours, and the West would all benefit from immediate talks and ceasefire. The Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said some months ago that he thought Crimea (annexed by Russia in 2014) was not likely to be returned to Ukraine unless there was a regime-change in Moscow. It should be noted that in 2014, it wasn’t quite an invasion that took place since Russia was already there, leasing a naval base from Ukraine.

I must underline that it is entirely unacceptable that Russia uses military force against its neighbour, Ukraine, its brothers, sisters, cousins and friends. But we should also try to understand the causes for it, again without accepting it, but important in seeking peace. It is likely that Russia will have similar demands on Belarus in the future, if the country would be tempted to try to slide into the Western fold, as many outspoken people in Belarus seem to want, but not President Alexander Lukashenko (67), in power since 1994 when the country was established. Russia would certainly require Belarus to remain a part of the Russian sphere of influence, a buffer on its western flank, perhaps defined as a neutral state, or integrated in Russia, on its way back to empire-dreams. Georgia and Chechnya have already been forced into the Russian fold. Moldova is a small country, but Russia may also want that country to toe the line once the ‘Ukraine issue’ has been solved more or less in its interest.

If NATO and USA do their work well now, unlike in the last decades, they should immediately help facilitate and hold talks with Russia and Ukraine, and also separatist groups, not in the unproductive style of recent years. Again, I wonder if the West has not fuelled and triggered the ongoing tragedy in Ukraine. However, the responsibility for the actions, the military invasion and war, falls on Russia’s shoulders and heart. It is a tragedy for the victims and the perpetrators alike, for the beautiful country and people of Ukraine—and also of Russia.

Wars are always cruel, like this one more than ever, screened on TV and other media, so we can all see. Besides, all wars are wrong and illegal according to the United Nations Charter, in force since 24 October 1945. Talks and negotiations must never end. Let us in future do what is possible to create peace and democracy, not rearmament and organisations and industries of destruction. We need to establish new UN and other organisations and institutions to teach the peace ideals and practices in the minds and hearts of people everywhere. Perhaps the war in Ukraine can help us to do that, so that we truly can greet each other with the words, ‘Peace be with you’, Assalam-o-alaikum, Salama, Shalom

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