War and Peace in the Middle East

Part 1 of 2: Understanding War and Peace in the Middle East
with
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Welcome to The Table where we discuss issues of God and culture. I’m Darrell Bock, Executive Director for Cultural Engagement at the Hendricks Center at Dallas Theological Seminary. And I have two very distinguished guests with me today. Through the miracle of technology, we’re talking to Imad Shehadeh who is in Jordan. That’s not Jordan, Texas or Jordan, Georgia, okay? That’s the country of Jordan where he has already experienced most of the day. And then Andy Seidel is with us, formally executive director for Christian Leadership at Dallas Theological Seminary. And now you are?

I am an adjunct professor working in extension sites for DTS.

There you go. And you formally taught at the military academy, is that right?

I did. I taught mathematics at West Point for four years.

Okay. Very good. And Imad, give us your official title.

Okay. I’m the president of Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary and I’m a professor of theology there.

That’s right. And he’s also a distinguished member of the board here at Dallas Seminary so we get to see Imad a couple of times a year when he journeys back over and touches base with us.

Thank you both for being here. Our topics today, because those introductions gave you no clues to what we were going to discuss –

It’s mathematics.

That’s right. It has to do with the issue of war, peace and the Middle East and kind of where we are thinking about that both in Biblical terms as well as what the status of things is in the Middle East and what it’s like to be living in the Middle East these days. I want to thank you all for taking the time to come in and talk with us about this.

Glad to do it.
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*Darrell Bock*  
Andy, I’m going to start off with you. You came to the seminary with a career out of the military, and some people would say how do the military and Christianity mix? How do you put war and peace together? How do you view that? And I can’t think of a better person to ask than someone who has spent their life both as a pastor and in the military this question. So how do you put that together? How do you deal, when you come to the issue of war and peace and you think about that biblically and you think about your career in the military, how do you put those two things together?

*Andrew Seidel*  
Well, I think for me it was a relatively easy thing because when I went into the military, I went out of high school, I went to West Point and the values of the military, Christianity was much a part of that. A lot of my spiritual growth came as a result of other members of the military who disciple me and helped me. Part of the Officers Christian Fellowship. It was a very significant thing spiritually. So the two of them were not spiritually separated at all; there was no divorce there. So a lot of the values of service and of protection of the weak, things like that, all of those were good military values and they were good Christian values as well. Respect for people. So I learned a lot of that strongly in my early part of the military career.

*Darrell Bock*  
Interesting. Because what a lot of people will assume is that we have the military – I’m going to state it this way and you can react, and you can push back if you want. We have the military really to protect us on the one hand, but also to fight our battles for us, to go to war. But my take is from having interaction with military people over the years is that the military really sees itself as existing in part, enabling us to keep the peace as opposed to doing wars. Would that be a fair way to think about the way the military sees itself?

*Andrew Seidel*  
Yeah, I would say that’s true. You don’t see in American military the aggressive ‘let’s take over some place.’ It’s more of a protection. My first military experience was in Korea, this was post-Korean war but I was on the de-militarized zone between North and South Korea so it was a matter of protection, a matter of protecting South Korea. You also always have to say protecting American interests. That’s true. Every country does that. But I have not seen it in a negative sense in taking over someplace. It has been essentially a good experience and one that I could feel comfortable with as a Christian.
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Darrell Bock

The scriptures speak of the military in Romans 13 as having the power of the sword, which is an element of protection of its people, and that kind of thing. So there’s biblical basis for that. And the idea of nations having interests that they have to protect is something, to a certain degree, scripture assumes. I’m laying this groundwork because I think it’s important in thinking about issues that we live in a fallen world, there is conflict. People treat each other badly and there’s protection that is sometimes necessary at a corporate or national level in terms of interest.

I’m doing some prolegomena here. Let me shift to another topic that I think is important and that is the idea of Just War. That in the background of really even Christian thinking about conflict, there has been a teaching and an idea which many nations embrace, particularly in the west at least theoretically, that there is such a concept as Just War. Just War comes out of a Christian tradition; I think it’s rooted in the teachings of Augustan and others. And most people have probably heard the phrase but don’t know what’s involved in it. And I have a list here of things and I just want you to kind of comment on them. I could have given you an exam and said, ‘List the various features of Just War.’

Andrew Seidel

I think one of the main reasons is you go to war for a just reason. It’s not for a selfish reason, that kind of thing, where you’re going to enslave somebody else for your own benefit, something like that. But the reason you go has got to be just.

Darrell Bock

Yeah. In fact that’s point one. The war must have a just cause and be fundamentally what we might call a defensive war. It is for protection; it is to protect certain interests, that kind of thing, that are at risk or at threat because of some form of aggression or something like that. It’s protective in that kind of way. That’s the first category.

A second category is it must have a just intention to secure a fair piece for all parties. So that excludes things like national revenge, economic exploitation or ethnic cleansing, for those kinds of reasons.

It must be a last resort, that all diplomatic efforts are at least sustained, diplomatic efforts have been pursued and may even continue while the war is being pursued because the goal is not to continue to fight but to get to a resolution and get back to a state of peace.
A fourth one is, although I think this has become cloudier in the more modern world, properly constituted authorities declare it and the war is to be the work of states. This is one of the things that’s changed.

Andrew Seidel: Yeah, that has changed dramatically because you have Al-Qaeda and things like that, they are not states and they are going to war and other countries are having to come and have conflict with them. And they’re not under the same rules.

Darrell Bock: So some of these, as I said, the roots of these go back to Augustan. We’re talking about a different time and different place when there were different realities. But this is generally the way the doctrine of Just War has been stated. It must have limited objectives, in other words the goal is not the annihilation of the enemy but really an effort to prosecute a war that has the limited objectives of providing the protection and providing the security or securing the kinds of just interests that the war is pursuing.

It has to use proportionate means sufficient to secure the aggression and this is another place where the ancient doctrine and the modern discussion run into kind of each other because with the rise of nuclear weapons and the potential of total destruction, the issue of proportionality becomes a pretty important concept to wrestle with.

And then seventh, it must respect non-combative immunity as much as possible, including wounded soldiers or prisoners of war, weapons of indiscriminate mass destruction are considered immoral in the concept of Just War. So theoretically you don’t just go in and obliterate a city or something like that. Again, comparing the ancient teaching to the modern situation, that’s one of the things that made the American’s use of the nuclear bomb in Japan controversial, was because in the effort to quickly end the war with a devastating act, a lot of civilians were killed.
But you can’t stop there because that decision was made toward the end of World War II obviously. And one of the things that really impacted the US decision was the Battle of Okinawa because in Okinawa, that was a Japanese island. It wasn’t one that they just occupied; that was part of their nation. And what happened in the Battle of Okinawa is that Japanese citizens on that island, not just Japanese military – the military did suicide charges, some of the civilians joined in with that. But that’s also the place where all the civilians, remember they jumped off the cliff into the ocean and committed suicide. That is also the place where you had the kamikazes, that’s the first time kamikazes really became prevalent.

There’s a really interesting book on that, Ripples of Battles, and it’s about the impact of various battles on the future and how we fight battles today. Well, one of the things with the kamikazes, they did not sink any significant ship, no aircraft carriers. They sunk mostly destroyers and stuff like that. But what happened is that it communicated that they are going to die rather than give up. So the question is will Japan surrender even though we’re getting closer and closer and closer and we’re bombing them and things like that.

And they also had radio intercepts of what was going on in Japan, that they were arming the civilians and that everybody was going to fight to the death.

So it isn’t as neutral as it looks.

No, it’s not. And so what the Americans faced is if we have to invade Japan, think about the cost of invading those smaller islands. If we have to invade Japan, the estimate was at least a million American lives and who knows how many –

Countless Japanese.

Yeah, Japanese lives. So they have that decision so what they do is they decide to use the nuclear weapon. I don’t remember exactly all the things that they did but they gave some warning to it and they dropped it and then they dropped the second one and then the Japanese indicated that they were going to surrender. Now some of the controversy is did they really need to drop the second one. But I can’t really speak to that. But that caused a lot of devastation.
But you can firebomb cities. Go back to the ancient world, you set fire to cities and they didn’t have the fire people that we do today. There’s a quantitative jump. But it’s a similar thing.

Right. The reason you got through this and think about it is most people don’t even think about it, they just think there’s war or peace. They don’t think about the fact that there are actually people who really do wrestle with these kinds of decisions in very serious kinds of ways in terms of the consequences that are dealt with. Those are mostly elements that feed into a Just War situation.

Now why paint a picture of war and conflict? Well, that’s because in certain parts of the world, obviously we are engaged in conflict and places are full of tension. And probably no place is as much like that, Imad, as the Middle East. Why don’t you tell people your own personal background a little bit so they kind of see where you fit into the Middle East story personally, and then they’ll have some sense of what perspective you’re speaking out of. And then tell us a little bit about what it’s like to live in Jordan nowadays with what’s going on around you.

Okay. Well, my personal background is I am a Syrian Arab originally. I came to college in the US in the early ‘70s and I became a Christian there at the University of California in San Diego, and years later became a full time ministry and went to Dallas Seminary. There’s a lot of jokes about a Palestinian being at a dispensational school.

I thought the church and Israel were completely distinct and I guess that may mean it’s true.

Oh, yeah. Lots of stories on that; appreciate my Dallas experience as to put the scripture first and my background second. And that gave me so many tools in the present ministry we have with the seminary and establishing the seminary about 25 years ago in Amman, Jordan.
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And of course it’s not easy. It’s been a rough road. One of the challenges, even before all the tensions that are present even teaching in the seminary and men and women who come from these Arab countries who hate Israel, you have to teach eschatology and to show them from the scriptures how to see the grace of God and the faithfulness of God to His word, to His covenants and so forth, and to try to give a balance. And it’s been a good experience in seeing how teaching eschatology has been a means to communicate grace to all these different people. You have Palestinians, Iraqis, Syrians, Egyptians who are Christian believers, just not had the exposure to think about these issues and see how so much of their thinking has been effected by the majority of religion rather than by scripture and so forth. So that’s been a good experience. Of course there is so much to talk about, but obviously we have to cut short.

Going to what we are going through right now in the Middle East, it’s unprecedented in several ways. Excuse me for my little bit of a cold here. In several ways. The Middle East is so divided right now politically, so that it’s just so many groups against each other it’s like the enemy of my enemy is my enemy and it’s all over the place. There have been some unprecedented people who have been traditionally opposing each other standing on the same side together, against one extremist group, nations that normally don’t stand together are standing together and so forth. I’m limited in what I can say, but this is happening.

Darrell Bock

Let me see if I can give a little bit of context for people because most people just know there is conflict in the Middle East and that kind of thing but they don’t know some of the history behind this and I’m hoping, Imad, that you can help us a little bit with this so that people kind of understand where some of the tensions were. And I’m going to take us back to the beginning of the 20th Century when the Ottoman Empire basically broke up. Nations were created out of that residue, and really in many ways some of the problems that exist, exist because of the way those boundaries were drawn. Is that a fair starting point for some of what we’re talking about?

Imad Shehadeh

That’s true. If you look at the map, geographically you wonder how these territories, how these borders came to be. And it was basically of the French protectorates, what they called, the British protectorates. So Jordan and Saudi Arabia and Israel were under the British and so was Iraq, but Syria and Lebanon were under the French. So there’s that background there. So that’s true.
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*Darrell Bock*  
So it’s put together combinations of people into nations that were, to some degree – I’m going to try to be descriptive here so people will get it – artificially created into a nation and you had mixtures of people who struggled to get along. Fair enough?

*Imad Shehadeh*  
That’s true. Exactly.

*Darrell Bock*  
And these produced regional pressures within these – and you don’t even have to put Israel in the mix because we’re talking about a time when Israel as a nation didn’t exist, of course. And you had this mix of countries with the different parties within Islam – a lot of people don’t even know there are different parties within Islam – trying to exist side by side, and they had tensions with each other. So that’s part of the reality, right?

*Imad Shehadeh*  
Yes. Now the majority of the Arabic speaking world would be the Sunni Islam. The majority of Iraq would be Shiite Islam, but that’s on the eastern side of the Arab countries, and Iraq is a neighbor of Iran, which is mostly Shites. So now the tension we’ve got with Iran’s penetration with dominating Syria and Hezbollah in the south of Lebanon. So you have Shiite penetration into Syria and Lebanon and then recently in Yemen so there’s this going on, and Sunni Muslims don’t like that and so they are reacting to this. And then also there is the tension between Sunnis and Shites, represented by the tension between ISIS and the moderate Sunni states. So that’s giving more tension to the situation.

And then you have Israel siding with some of the Sunni states against another Sunni extremist group while the Shites are on the side of some of the Sunnis in Iraq to fight this same Shiite group. It’s really complicated.

*Darrell Bock*  
Yeah. It sounds it. We don’t have a visual; we might need one to map out with colors what’s going on here. I actually think this is important because part of what it says to people is that when you say the word Islam, you’re actually dealing with, there’s a huge amount of people that we’re talking about in the region, but it’s not one block. It’s not one thing. There are different expressions of Islam with different mixtures of, I’m going to say it this way, it might not be the best description, but a peace or violence mixed into it which then produces combustible elements within these countries. And as a said, we hardly said a word about Israel yet in any of this. And so I think that’s an important part of the picture that it’s important that people get.
Now you add to that mix coming with the founding of Israel in the 1940s, you add that into the mix and the Arab reaction and Palestinian reaction that came with the establishment of the nation of Israel in this area and all that did was add fuel to the smoldering fire.

**Imad Shehadeh**  
Right. Now most of Islam is Sunni Islam, 90%. Shiite Islam would be the minority. And most of the Arab countries, that’s 22 countries from Africa all the way to Iraq would be Sunni Muslim. Iraq would be the only Arab country where the majority of people are Shiite. So that’s what you have.

**Darrell Bock**  
If you were to help people kind of summarize the difference between Sunni and Shiite, is there a way to summarize what that difference would be?

**Imad Shehadeh**  
Essentially it’s a difference of what actually happened in history and what Shiites wished happened but did not happen. Traditionally the establishment of the khalifa took over after Muhammad died was one thing, and the Shiites feel it should have been a different line rather than –

**Darrell Bock**  
This is a prophetic line that you’re talking about or – you used a technical term here that wasn’t English so I’m asking you to translate it for us.

**Andrew Seidel**  
It’s a family line, wasn’t it?

**Imad Shehadeh**  
That’s Islamic thinking, the Rashid khalifa took over after Muhammad for reasons that nobody fully knows for sure. Whereas the Shiites feel it should not have been given in that way. With history, there has been differences in their beliefs a little bit. They still believe in Muhammad and the Koran as the same book, but they feel that the authority of the khalifa belongs to the Shiites understanding and not to the traditional, classical understanding.

**Darrell Bock**  
So this is a family feud at its roots. Interesting.
Okay, Andy. So you look at this from the outside as an American, someone who has also been involved in the military. What do you see going on as you think about the chaos, whether we’re thinking about it from a historical point of view of kind of where we are now? It’s kind of an open-ended question.

It’s so similar to so many things. Some of it has to do with bad government, just bad government. One group oppressing another group or one group keeping another group down, one group favoring its own; Saddam Hussein was like that. Rulers tend to be like that. So if there’s some reason to discriminate against another group, they’ll do that. So you have just a boiling up of all of these tensions, as Imad said, that’s a huge group of people. And they have all kinds of historical and current reasons to be upset with each other.

Originally as I was thinking about it, it’s sad that here you had a tribal group and some of them are against each other, too. So now you have one group that for a particular religious view is oppressing so many of them. ISIS is basically a Shiite group, if I understand correctly. And what happens is now they’re oppressing Sunnis as well as Shiites and so it’s been like that through the years, I’m sure.

And Jordan occupies an unusual position in all of this as a country. Is that not true? It seems of most of the Arab countries, perhaps Egypt is in a similar category, to have managed being a part of this mix relatively well and had been one of the more stable countries in the region. But its feeling pressure now, too, isn’t it?

Yes and no. It’s interesting what’s happening. Of course Jordan, as you know, has a border with Israel. Israel is to the west of it and Iraq to the east, Syria to the north. And that pressure of refugees coming into Jordan and then Saudi to the south. Like maybe you’ve heard it said, Jordan is between Iraq and a hard place.

But it has been amazingly stable. It’s interesting but some of the analysis has been that Jordan is now more stable. One main reason is because when Israel became a state, so many Palestinians immigrated to Jordan, and the majority of the Jordanian population until this day has been Palestinian and not Jordanian. So it’s been a polarity of Jordanian Palestinian.
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But now with so many refugees from Iraq and Syria, it’s changed. Someone the minority group is no longer a minority. There are more groups and they’re more equal now to give Jordan more stability and the government of Jordan is looking to give the Jordanian citizenship to the Iraqis and to the Syrians and they’re finding better jobs, better lives, and they want to stay in Jordan. So Jordan is actually in a way stronger, although there’s been this amazing pressure. Actually in the last 20 years Jordan’s population more than doubled that way. So it’s interesting.

So Jordan typically has been kind of a country of refuge for so many people. The Lebanese before that, it began with the Palestinians, then the Lebanese and the Iraqs and a lot of Libyans came in. A lot of Syrians now are coming in. It’s giving Jordan kind of a picture of being let’s keep a country, at least keep a country that we can go to. Although it looks like it could be next, but by God’s grace it’s been so far stable at this point. So we’re thankful for that.

One amazing byproduct that was not planned by ISIS is we have more students from these refugees from these countries. They become students at the seminary and it’s just amazing. God’s way of preparing people from these countries to go back and serve and being more equipped. So we love it; it’s great. We just need more scholarships.

Darrell Bock

That’s true. It’s interesting. I know a little bit about the history of the seminary and it’s interesting. There was a time in which you were educating people literally from all over the Arab world and then things got tightened down a little bit and so that became harder. Now there’s a new form of recruitment through the circumstances, God is bringing them into the country and therefore they have access again to the education.

We aren’t going to solve the Middle East crisis in this podcast so I’m not even going to try. But I did want some background for what we were going to discuss in place so that people can understand the confusing thing. Now I’m speaking particularly to Americans who are listening to this. I think sometimes Americans – first of all we’re kind of slow to get our hands around what goes on in different parts of the world. Particularly when it comes to Islam, we tend to think of Islam as one, singular thing. We don’t realize the differences that exist within Islam, the tensions that exists amongst Muslims, and how that is part of what’s going on here that makes this such a difficult reality to deal with.
I do have one more question for you, Andy, that’s kind of a background question and then I’m going to switch over and begin to ask the questions. So how do Christians function in the midst of this? And that’s this. When someone like you and you’re in the military and you go into this, the military really makes quite an effort to make sure people have a sense of this history and these tensions and where they’re coming from. Don’t they do some preparation for people who are going to be stationed in these locations, to give them a sense of what it is they’re walking into in terms of the cultural background and realities of what they’re facing?

**Andrew Seidel**

Yeah, they try to do that. Especially post World War II they’ve had to do that. In Vietnam, they did considerable instruction of us, partly about the people but recognizing the insurgent aspect of the war. Very, very strict on how we related to the people and respected them. So yes, they try to do that. The problem is sometimes you get caught and you’re coming from behind and you’re trying to catch up on what we know.

Just like now. We find ourselves supporting the same things that Iran is supporting in one case and being against it in another case. It’s very complicated in that situation.

**Darrell Bock**

So can you fill that out a little bit in terms of what we’re looking at? Depending on where we are in the region and the nature of the regional conflict, we are in some cases supporting and in other cases against. Is that where we find ourselves?

**Andrew Seidel**

Yes. Yes. That’s very, very difficult. Also this is a new day because the media is there. The media is right there. So the way you relate to people from the country whether they are friends or enemies is very, very significant because it’s reported immediately. We went to a huge amount – we understood the counter-insurgency issues in Vietnam not to have casualties among civilians because first of all they didn’t need that because they were not against us. But secondly, it might cause them to go to the other side. So it gets to be very complicated. So something happens, you’ve got a media person right there.
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And it’s even more so in the Middle East. Some of the wars in Israel, there’s media on both sides of the battles and I have seen a number of times that is used by one side or the other to say, ‘Oh look, you’re killing civilians.’ This kind of thing. So it gets to be very, very difficult. I think the US works very hard to try to educate its soldiers about the issues that are going on in the country so that they can relate to civilians well because in the counter-insurgency things, the enemy hides among the civilians.

With ISIS that’s a little different because they have changed the situation. The insurgents, they weren’t trying to hold onto territory or something. They were just trying to fight and kill their enemy, which in Iraq was us. Now, ISIS is, they’re going to have a Caliphate and all that, and they have to have territory. So this is interestingly kind of taking a step back to a situation where they are saying that they are a nation now. Well, Al-Qaeda didn’t do that. They were just a terrorist organization with others like that. so for them it wasn’t a matter of conquering territory and holding that territory. With ISIS it is because if they can’t hold the territory, they’re not a nation. So we’re in a very complicated situation.