

**The Royal Society of Edinburgh
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Inching Towards Peace – A New International Humanitarian Order

HRH Prince El Hassan bin Talal

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Report by Jennifer Trueland

In the Edinburgh Lecture, Prince Hassan El Hassan bin Talal of Jordan called for a humanitarian approach to address the problems facing the world and, in particular, the West Asia–North Africa (WANA) region. Covering areas including climate change, nuclear weapons, water and oil, he said that the human aspect must not be ignored.

Violence and disaster, natural and man-made, are daily news, but what can we, as individuals, do to prevent them or at least mitigate their effects? How can we get at the roots of what goes wrong and change what grows from them?

These were the questions posed by Prince El Hassan bin Talal in his first lecture as an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. His talk was the RSE's contribution to the prestigious Edinburgh Lectures series. It outlined the problems facing the world today, suggested how these should be tackled, and ended with a plea to the RSE and to Scotland more widely to work together to address them.

In particular he said the problems should be addressed from a “humanitarian perspective”, which takes into account the needs and aspirations of the whole human race, to do what we can to put right what is wrong, not just with the environment, but with humanity as a whole.

The issues facing the world include: environmental concerns; the growth in world population; the imbalance between wealth and poverty; and violence which springs from the need to defend or assert political boundaries or religious faith.

Prince Hassan described many of the groups and initiatives set up to tackle these problems; he has played a leading role in many of these projects, including the UN Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues, which he co-chaired in the early 1980s. Its report, called *Winning the Human Race?*, outlined global issues such as population, poverty and the environment. It also described the plight of the victims and looked at man-made and other disasters, including famine, desertification, nuclear power and industrial disasters.

The report recommendations included a UN code on disaster management, building global consensus and strengthening multilateralism. As a result, the Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues was set up, but sadly the issues outlined in the report still remain pressing today.

Prince Hassan said that the humanitarian perspective takes into account eight elements. These are:

- Human solidarity – including respect for human life and dignity now and for future generations;
- Dialogue – between all the world religions to mobilise people to tackle shared problems;

- Security – which must be achieved through winning hearts, not by restrictive action, and by tackling the causes of conflict, such as poverty and marginalisation;
- Economy, energy and the human environment – these common issues should be addressed together, with a long-term perspective;
- Multilateralism – all parties should share a common code of conduct on security, economy and human development; issues such as arms control, reconciliation after conflict, and the environment, depend on such a code;
- Democracy and civil society – such a common code (above) would be a basis for an equitable policy on this, to allow people to feel empowered and in control of their own destiny;
- Culture and education – modern technology and communications give us knowledge about other societies, but must also give us understanding so that we can draw strength from diversity;
- Universal consciousness – globalisation is not just about economics or the spread of capitalism; it is rather about the emergence of a common global consciousness which implies compassion and altruism and where injury to one is injury to all. “We neglect the principle of the ‘Global Commons’ at our peril,” said Prince Hassan.

Shared values such as respect, responsibility and altruism have helped ensure humanity’s survival and wellbeing from time immemorial, the Prince said. The start of the 21st Century saw a change in human conflict from earlier wars between defined nations, to internal struggles, such as those in Rwanda and Bosnia. The events of 11 September 2001 changed the focus of debate from genocide to the prevention of terrorism and the risk of weapons of mass destruction. The ‘right to protect’ became a major issue discussed in a number of international fora. In 2005 it was agreed (at the World Summit) that every state has a duty to protect its population from crimes against humanity and that the international community must help them to do so. Prince Hassan hoped that a future UN Resolution would embody these principles.

For the final part of his lecture, the Prince moved from a universal to a regional perspective, particularly addressing the region from which he comes. “A third world country, that is my first world country, the fertile (and at times futile) crescent that embraces Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Israel and Saudi Arabia, with Jordan in its midst,” he said.

There are huge pressures on this region – which Prince Hassan calls West Asia. These include not only issues such as Gaza, but also pressures on human, natural and economic resources. Water is a major issue, which is why Prince Hassan has urged the creation of a supranational Water and Energy Community for the region.

The Prince has also established a Regional Human Security Centre in Jordan and the West Asia–North Africa (WANA) Forum, which recognises that many of the region’s problems are shared by the countries of the southern Mediterranean, in particular Egypt. He has called for the ‘greening’ of the WANA region and for a regional cohesion fund to benefit the region in the long term, not just in times of conflict.

Prince Hassan said he is committed to a regional peace process based on the Helsinki model, whose objectives are threefold: economic, human and cultural. Economy includes the all-important world resource of oil. He believes a West Asian consensus would stabilise the global community and relieve tensions at the vulnerable ‘choke points’ of the oil economy. Human security depends on preventative diplomacy, he said. There must also be action to address the issues which arise from the displacement of people, including those displaced by climate change, conflict or economic circumstances.

Culture covers issues from poverty to climate change and, indeed, the impact of climate change on human society, such as its effects on nutrition and health, is blatantly apparent. A global consensus is needed “on the control of water, on agricultural priorities and on health, and policies for the containment of migration, if poverty is not to increase,” he said.

Now, more than ever, we cannot afford to squander any of our endangered assets on unproductive conflicts and war, the Prince added. He called for an official conference for security and co-operation in WANA, the remit of which would encompass a wide range of issues affecting the region. This would include a common policy on water control and a robust “composite security” to prevent terrorism and reduce wasteful expenditure on defence. “Only then will a rule of humanitarian and international law have substance; only then will we build a ‘template for peace’ in WANA.”

Prince Hassan hopes it will not be another 30 years before current problems are resolved. Indeed, he can discern at least some progress world-wide towards a new ‘humanitarian order’. “Inch by inch we have crawled forward. Unless we expand the scope of our efforts and increase the pace we may be too late,” he said. “Common understanding of these facts is now shared between the nations of the world, but we need to turn understanding into action, here, there and everywhere.”

In achieving this, he invited the RSE’s help, saying that the body was founded for the advancement of learning and useful knowledge. “West Asia is in desperate need of such support,” he said, adding that he would like to see lectures and debates in Edinburgh on the practical means of realising the goals he had outlined for West Asia. “Both our countries could benefit from an international exchange of research and enterprise.”

He concluded: “It is only by spreading learning and knowledge of the facts and needs that we can hope to win the battle for people’s minds, by which a resolution of the present problems, in which we all have an interest, can be achieved.”

Questions

Prince Hassan took a variety of questions from the audience, which included Jordanian nationals, academics and interested members of the public. Asked whether he felt we had entered a ‘third world war’ in Iraq, he said he understood the questioner’s anxiety and, indeed, that there were severe problems, including the threat of nuclear war, and that NATO should take more action in the region. He declined, however, to label it a ‘third world war’. Asked whether religion could promote peace as well as enhance war, Prince Hassan stressed that religion should not be blamed for fundamentalism, rather that religion should have a role in promoting ‘common good’.

A Jordanian national questioned Prince Hassan’s hope that West Asia–North Africa was “inching towards peace”, asking if instead the problems were getting worse. Prince Hassan said he assumed the questioner was referring to Palestine, and admitted that there would be challenges in finding a satisfactory resolution.

He was also asked about resources, and reiterated his point about the importance of water, and his call for a supranational Water and Energy Community for the region. He called for politicians to be statesmanlike, and to take action for the long-term good of the region and the world, rather than be blinkered by “short-termism”.

The vote of thanks was delivered by RSE President Lord Wilson of Tillyorn KT GCMG.

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