

BOOK REVIEW

TITLE: *How Not To Go To War. Establishing Departments for Peace and Peace Centres Worldwide*

AUTHOR: Vijay Mehta

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I heard of Vijay Mehta's book, *How Not To Go To War*, soon after it came out at the beginning of 2019. Mehta is an author and a peace activist with several books on his CV. He is also the Chair of the Uniting for Peace organization in the UK, has dedicated his life to working for peace everywhere, and travels the world to speak about building a peaceful world and how to achieve it.

The book sets the present, dangerous warfare scene throughout the world with more than 20 wars going on, a soaring military expenditure to a record high \$1.7 trillion in 2017 or about one thousand dollars per family globally, with the prospects of further deterioration with the threat of nuclear war hanging in the air. That is done in a very detailed and considerate manner, and Mehta is concerned. Destruction-oriented heads of state mark the present leadership in the world in some countries and a world leader that is withdrawing from international cooperation and setting into further motion decreasing multilateralism, while the United Nations is not living up to its task of protecting people from the scourge of war, according to Mehta. Something needs to be done to remedy the situation, and that is to institutionalize peace from the government level to the local level of the society in all countries, throughout the world. The book argues that institutions of war must be matched by institutions of peace to give peace a chance to settle permanently in society and that military costs should be turned into support for peace and social welfare programs, befitting the entire population.

Mehta links his proposal to the call of the United Nations for a culture of peace to be observed by all its member states, and his book promotes a policy that establishes Departments for Peace led by a minister to counterbalance ministries of defense and sets up Peace Centres in areas of need, in cities, towns and villages. The Department for Peace would promote a culture of peace and work for disarmament, at home and abroad at the policy level, and allocate public resources to conflict prevention. The Peace Centres would monitor and prevent tension in society, deal with mediation and reconciliation between antagonistic groups, and activate people with peaceful leisure activities, including young people who would otherwise roam the streets of a country, young males, for instance, who could be exposed to radicalization. Peace Centres are for the entire population. They would offer a wide range of activities that would give people a meaningful life without harming others, from dialogues between conflicting parties, debates of topical issues, to various hobby

activities, sports, and concerts for all. The Peace Centres would also focus on human rights, the rule of law and democracy.

Five countries have already established a Department for Peace, including Costa Rica, Ethiopia, Nepal, Solomon Islands, and South Sudan, and up to 50 countries are planning or discussing to do so, including the Labour Party of the United Kingdom, once they get into power again. Mehta is optimistic and convinced that many more countries would do it, and his mission to advocate for Departments for Peace and Peace Centres is an important one.

What Mehta does not discuss is how the Peace Centres would interact with the centres for human rights already established in several countries, set up by national parliaments or other governance or NGO structures at the recommendation of the United Nations General Assembly, which serve as a watchdog for the observance of human rights, and likewise monitor tension in society. Are they to share premises for instance to encourage collaboration and synergetic effect on monitoring roots and rise of tension in society? Or are they thought to be separate entities, with each one its specific objective, human rights centres advocating and insisting on the observance of human rights to all and Peace Centres activating people and keeping them from preventing others from enjoying their human rights?

With the main argument set out, Mehta addresses the issue of peace from many angles – some of them unusual ones - as a culture of peace takes the participation of all sectors and all segments of society. He demonstrates that war is a male phenomenon. Not that we did not know it, but it is seldom mentioned as explicitly as he does. He also reveals the long term effect of going to war exemplified by the situation in Britain, where certain areas still haven't recovered from the poverty generated by the Second World War and subsequent years with public funds spent on militarism. Mehta shows that defense spending has no impact on the growth of society and that activities of arms manufacturers ought to be deleted from the GDP calculation, which he suggests to include merely constructive economic activity. Not that he is the only one saying so, but it shows that he is investigating the full picture of the damage caused by militarism.

In a separate chapter he argues for the corporate sector to help institutionalize peace in society by setting up social business enterprises, and fair trade purchase business practices of reasonable prices to producers in the Third World, free access to markets, etc., to place peace activism on a financially sustainable basis and that eventually will even out inequality and hence reduce a potential source of tension and conflict.

A good deal of the book is set aside as appendixes at the end, mostly on the establishment of Departments for Peace, including as the very last one a draft United Nations General Assembly resolution on building the architecture of peace: ministries or Departments for Peace within governments to strengthen the culture of peace within a country and globally. We are not told when the resolution was drafted, or who sponsored it and if it is likely to be adopted by the General Assembly? If it were feasible, it would be a big step forward for the establishment of Departments for Peace in the world to match departments of defense, for which Mehta is a vigorous advocate.

Vijay Mehta is a diligent writer with an extensive knowledge of peace. He has written three notable books in seven years, in which he meticulously researches various aspects of peace, such as *The Economics of Killing* (Pluto Press, 2012), *Peace Beyond Borders* (New Internationalist, 2016) and

the current one. All three reveal deep insight into the subject matter, the richness of detail and are concrete action-oriented. After presenting the nature of the problem, suggestions for remedy follow. What is missing is another book on how to prevent inhumane systematic attacks on civilians, to end impunity and dissolve the self-perceived immunity of perpetrators. There is now a movement in the making against the apparent total impunity for parties of today's wars, where they commit systematic and blatant violations of the Geneva Conventions and other international law, commit war crimes with massive, deadly attacks on civilians, as the tragic situation in Syria bears witness to. Its name is United Against Inhumanity. Imagine what could be achieved, if Mehta were to link up with them and detailed for us what should and could be done to stop attacks on civilians and bring perpetrators to justice.

Read *How To Avoid To Go To War*. Grab it if you get a chance. It will widen your perspective on peace matters. Vijay Mehta's motto is: be good and do good.