

# ISAS Insights

**No. 309 – 1 February 2016**

Institute of South Asian Studies  
National University of Singapore  
29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace  
#08-06 (Block B)  
Singapore 119620  
Tel: (65) 6516 4239 Fax: (65) 6776 7505  
[www.isas.nus.edu.sg](http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg)  
<http://southasiandiaspora.org>



## **Could the Middle East Quagmire Be Solved with Something like ASEAN?<sup>1</sup>**

Girija Pande<sup>2</sup>

“If you want to start a third world war-just call CNN and do something crazy like a belly dance or something here!” said our erudite guide, as I stood surveying one of the most historic and probably one of the most politically sensitive spots in the world.

This was Jerusalem – the old city – where my family and I stood on a hot July day in front of Temple Mount (Dome of the Rock to Muslims).

The scorching Mediterranean sun reflected off the muzzle of the gun held by the soldier guarding what must be the most religious site on earth: You had the Wailing Wall, which is the only remains of the original Temple of Solomon – where once the Arc of Covenant was kept and the same spot where Abraham almost sacrificed his son Issac, making this the holiest spot

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper was first published by Forbes at

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/girijapande/2015/10/14/could-the-middle-east-quagmire-be-solved-with-something-like-asean/> on 14 October 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Mr Girija Pande is a Member of the Management Board of the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. The author, not ISAS, is responsible for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

in the world for Jews; just a stone's throw away is the Church of the Holy Sepulcher-site believed by Christians to be where Christ was crucified. The Christians recall the famous visit of Jesus to the Temple where he angrily overturned the tables of money lenders and while looking across at the Temple from the Mount of Olives, predicted its destruction. Next door, suspended like a huge golden half moon, is the Dome of the Rock considered the second most holy place by Muslims as their scriptures state that the Prophet ascended to heaven from this very spot.

So here we have, almost cheek by jowl, three of the world's great religions, layered one over the other since the dawn of time, with histories which often collide! Crowds were thronging around, some truly religious and some like me who being neither Christian nor Muslim nor Jewish were insulated from religious emotions and so more dispassionate, but equally dazzled by the historical overlay on everything around.

While the old city of Jerusalem remains in a time warp and steeped in antiquity, the rest of Israel aims to get to the next century in a hurry. Its innovative high tech companies, its highly productive agriculture & water management, its world beating talent and its working democracy gives it a special edge over its regional neighbours-many of whom could learn a thing or two about creation of a modern 21<sup>st</sup> century state in such a short time against such odds. What it hasn't been able to do, unfortunately, is to meet the legitimate Palestinian aspirations with a now well accepted two-state solution with Jerusalem as a common capital-as a bifurcation of this onion-like layered city, seems to an outsider, well nigh impossible. On its east, lies Syria torn asunder by religious wars which has made the region a tinder box for the world.

As I stood before the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem I wondered what would happen to this ancient region if they could somehow visualise a comity of neighbouring states joined into a regional federation of common market countries focussed on development instead of perennially baiting each other in a dance to destruction. Israel could provide all the constituents of a modern democratic state with its parliamentary democracy and a modern legal system which underpins its development and growth. Egypt possesses a large professional class and one of the largest markets in the Arab world. Lebanon has a well-developed service and finance sector. Syria, Palestine and Jordan have their educated work forces, while Turkey could anchor this neo-ASEAN association of neighbours as a modern secular state with links to Europe. A dream?

Not if you are a perennial optimist like me! Substitute Israel for Singapore, Turkey for Malaysia, Egypt for Indonesia and Jordan for the Philippines and you have an outline of what is possible. Resolving the Palestinian or Syrian political challenge fairly cannot be the end game surely, although its resolution remains the first step in unlocking the economic potential of this ancient region? It would be the bringing together of regional powers into an economic partnership that would allow the region to grow and stay peaceful.

ASEAN faced similar ‘hurdles of the mind’ before its visionary leaders focussing on the future, economically bound together vastly differing ASEAN states so successfully. The end of the devastating Vietnam war made everyone realize that conflict was a lose-lose proposition, similar to what we are seeing in the region today. Did anyone imagine at that time that this project would be a success or would ever take off? But it did with the determination of visionary leaders like Lee Kuan Yew, Mahathir Mohamad, Suharto and Ferdinand Marcos. If only history in the promised land could be a tailwind rather than a headwind, if religion was seen as living in each person’s heart rather than on the streets, if political dialogue would be less about the past but more about the win-win possibilities of regional co-operation...if only they could visualize the future... if only someone could tell their leaders the ASEAN story.

. . . . .