

Farewell to the Era of No Fences

di Bret Stephens

This was supposed to be the Era of No Fences. No walls between blocs. No borders between countries. No barriers to trade. Visa-free tourism. The single market. A global Internet. Frictionless transactions and seamless exchanges.

In short, a flat world. Whatever happened to that?

In the early 1990s, Israel's then-Foreign Minister Shimon Peres published a book called "The New Middle East," in which he predicted what was soon to be in store for his neighborhood. "Regional common markets reflect the new *Zeitgeist*," he gushed. It was only a matter of time before it would become true in his part of the world, too.

I read the book in college, and while it struck me as far-fetched it didn't seem altogether crazy. The decade from 1989 to 1999 was an age of political, economic, social and technological miracles. The Berlin Wall fell. The Soviet Union dissolved. Apartheid ended. The euro and Nafta were born. The first Internet browser was introduced. Oil dropped below \$10 a barrel, the Dow topped 10,000, Times Square became safe again. America won a war in Kosovo without losing a single man in combat.

Would Israeli businessmen soon be selling hummus and pita to quality-conscious consumers in Damascus? Well, why not?

Contrast this promised utopia with the mind-boggling scenes of tens of thousands of Middle East migrants, marching up the roads and railways of Europe, headed for their German promised land. The images seem like a 21st-century version of the *Völkerwanderung*, the migration of nations in the late Roman and early Medieval periods. Desperate people, needing a place to go, sweeping a broad landscape like an unchanneled flood.

How did this happen? We mistook a holiday from history for the end of it. We built a fenceless world on the wrong set of assumptions about the future. We wanted a new liberal order—one with a lot of liberalism and not a lot of order. We wanted to be a generous civilization without doing the things required to be a prosperous one.

In 2003 the political theorist Robert Kagan wrote a thoughtful book, "Of Paradise and Power," in which he took stock of the philosophical divide between Americans and Europeans. Americans, he wrote, inhabited the world of Thomas Hobbes, in which "true security and the

defense and promotion of a liberal order still depend on the possession and use of military might.”

Europeans, by contrast, lived in the world of Immanuel Kant, in which “perpetual peace” was guaranteed by a set of cultural conventions, consensually agreed rules and a belief in the virtues of social solidarity overseen by a redistributive state.

These differences didn’t matter much as long as they were confined to panel discussions at Davos. Then came the presidency of Barack Obama, which has adopted the Kantian view. For seven years, the U.S. and Europe have largely been on the same side—the European side—of most of the big issues, especially in the Mideast: getting out of Iraq, drawing down in Afghanistan, lightly intervening in Libya, staying out of Syria, making up with Iran.

The result is our metastasizing global disorder. It’s only going to get worse. The graciousness that Germans have shown the first wave of refugees is a tribute to the country’s sense of humanity and history. But just as the warm welcome is destined to create an irresistible magnet for future migrants, it is also bound to lead to a backlash among Germans.

This year, some 800,000 newcomers are expected in Germany—about 1% of the country’s population. Berlin wants an EU-wide quota system to divvy up the influx, but once the migrants are in Europe they are free to go wherever the jobs and opportunities may be. Germany (with 4.7% unemployment) is going to be a bigger draw than France (10.4%), to say nothing of Italy (12%) or Spain (22%).

If Germany had robust economic and demographic growth, it could absorb and assimilate the influx. It doesn’t, so it can’t. Growth has averaged 0.31% a year since 1991. The country has the world’s lowest birthrate. Tolerant modern Germany now looks with justified disdain toward the petty nationalism, burden-shifting and fence-building of the populist Hungarian government of Viktor Orbán. But it would be foolish to think of Hungary as a political throwback rather than as a harbinger. There is no such thing as a lesson from the past that people won’t ignore for the sake of the convenience of the present.

Is there a way out? Suddenly, there’s talk in Europe about using military power to establish safe zones in Syria to contain the exodus of refugees. If U.S. administrations decide on adopting Kant, Europe, even Germany, may have no choice but to reacquaint itself with Hobbes by rebuilding its military and using hard power against unraveling neighbors.

Europeans will not easily embrace that option. The alternative is to hasten the return to the era of fences. Openness is a virtue purchased through strength.