

## A view from the Middle East by Zoughbi Elias Zoughbi

Once again, the cycle of violence in the Middle East has escalated, dashing many of the hopes for a peaceful transformation that seemed within reach only a few years ago. Throughout these cycles, Zoughbi has been working at conflict transformation and peace building within the Palestinian community and on peace initiatives with Israelis and international colleagues. He is the director of Wi'am, a center for conflict resolution located in Bethlehem. In his capacity as an educator, trainer, peace activist, facilitator, and mediator, he has seen many well-intend people come and go in the past decade. He has worked extensively with international visitors. His advice suggests that our process is not only how to learn about and with people from the setting, but how to unlearn the view that are given about a place, its history, and its people from readily available but inadequate news and information.

I've heard it said, spend two days in the Middle East, and you can write a book, spend two months, and you can write an article; but spend two years, and you will write only a paragraph. This is true and valid wherever you go. Don't rush to write or think you have it all figured out too quickly.

I am the founder and director of a nongovernmental organization; previously, I ran a program dealing with exchange visits and alternative tourism to the Middle East. I have also been responsible for placing volunteers in the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and the Gaza Strip. The issues raised in all of these places are the same for any person entering a situation outside their home culture, though the details may be different. Here is the advice that I proffer based on my work.

### Understand Who You Are

Who am I? Is the first question you should ask yourself whenever you go anyplace in the world. What is my identity? What are my identities? Am I an outsider or an insider? Am I a social activist or a politically correct person?

In any foreign country, you are always an outsider. No matter what you attitude and position regarding this conflict or that, you are a foreigner. An no matter what you do, no matter what you represent, no matter what you ideology, philosophy, or principles, you can be part of the struggle, but the struggle is not yours.

### Good Intentions Are Not Enough

As a Westerner, you are probably aware of the recent interest in the topic of reconciliation. Almost everyone who comes to the Middle East pushes the agenda of reconciliation. Many have good intentions but shallow understanding of our situation and little empathy to understand the call of the oppressed for justice.

George, a visitor, promised a nongovernmental organization in Hebron thousands of dollars for a project titled, "Reconciliation: Jewish Settlers and Hebronites." Thousand of dollars will be spent on it if the Palestinians accept the project, the visitor tells us.

This very project, though, is full of insensitivity. In our context, an issue like settlements is thorny. Most Palestinian are asking for a dismantling of the settlements, as well as for the evacuation of Jewish settlers from the land occupied in 1967. The outsider looks at the theme as building reconciliation. But the very project title of the initiative requires Palestinians to deny their historic concerns. The point is

that it is offensive to people in conflict to face initiatives that do not take seriously an understanding of their history and situation.

#### Be Cautious of a Superficial Use of Balance

In our region, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is often viewed as a test case, a laboratory for human experiments and research. Hundreds of people come here to bring Israelis and Palestinians together, but with little consideration for historic issues, power relationships, and the dynamics of the conflict. The same is true of many other conflicts around the world.

An example from Palestine is illustrative. As a result of the intifadah of 1987-1992, an Israeli rabbi and a leading female Palestinian activist talked about the situation with a group from outside. A member of the expatriate body asked, "What can we do to help those people who were wounded by the Israeli soldiers?" The activist answered, "You can help by building clinics, supporting the hospitals, or even sending the wounded wheelchair. Here, the Israeli rabbi interjected, "Why not a wheelchair to the Palestinian and another one to the Israeli?"

On the surface, the response seems balanced. It is essentially saying, "Both of you are victims," But from a Palestinian viewpoint, the conflict itself is not balanced.

Many outsiders come and look at a situation from the perspective of neutrality. We see this as a very distorting and disturbing trend. Instead of saying, "I would like to have balanced view", say "I would like to work for justice for all people and fight against oppression in whatever form it is represented." This goal will take more strength, determination, and time.

The West is used to hearing balanced reporting about situations from many places in the world. Even in the midst of countless human rights violations taking place, Westerners think it is appropriate to mention equal number of violations for each party, even when this is not the case. Whenever you go to a foreign country, you should try to be impartial; it's the only truly respectable way to come at a situation. Impartiality is not neutrality, however, impartiality does not turn a blind eye to truth and justice.

#### Be Cautious About Pushing Your Cultural Values in the Name of Peace

Lots of newcomers focus on issues like gender without understanding the culture and tradition. We have lots of workshops where women represent 60 percent of group, for example, and they are outspoken, very powerful, and have perseverance and strong commitment.

The Ruth came and tried to push toward a program of women empowerment using her Western trends and feminist approaches, and imposing it on the locals. We appreciate Ruth and people like her who volunteer to serve the local community. However, it's important to listen to the local people and see what they want and need. Never tell them what they want and need.

#### Be Prepared for Suspicion

There will be people who will be suspicious because of the very fact that you come from a powerful country in the North. Remember that you are from the North, the source of colonialism and injustice, which has caused a lot of misery and oppression. Despite the fact that many people will differentiate between you as a civilian and the government that represents you, others think that you are responsible for the injustice perpetuated by your country at one time. You might be held responsible for your government's support of the bureaucratic authoritarian regimes in Latin America or the reactionary forces in Africa or the Middle East.

Seek to understand the historic patterns that underpin the suspicion. Don't assume that it is irrational. History is a problematic issue because it is often narration of the victor. You have studied for a longer

time than you will spend in other countries. Start unlearning what you learned in the past. It is a process that has a starting point but not an ending point.

### Focus on Building Trust

Trust is built with time, performance, and relationships, not just good intentions. Be prepared to take the time and pass the tests that are necessary for you, the visitor, to earn the trust of us, the ones living with the conflict. Be prepared to answer questions about yourself, your motivations, your goals, and to whom you are accountable. In situations of conflict, people need to know whom they can and cannot trust.

Be prepared to listen. People at our end need someone to listen to them. They need to talk, even to nag. You might have heard one story hundreds of times. You shouldn't show boredom or disrespect.

Don't promise a lot; certainly, never promise more than you can deliver. You need to be clear even if your hosts are ambiguous or not direct.

It is always good to build healthy and straightforward trusting relationships. If you write or interview or are being interviewed, share copies of the final product with the host. Ask questions to inform yourself, but realize how easily you may be misunderstood. Ask questions so you can learn. If you disagree or disapprove of a behavior, form your response as a question, not a judgment. Be inquisitive, taking a learning posture. Reserving judgment is good advice.

Don't come with negative perspective. Avoid stereotypes, patronization. Live as we live: live simply, walk humbly, love kindly, and do justice.

Learning the language is important but not as important as understanding the body language of the people you work with.

Celebrate the difference with the people you are seconded to. Respecting their culture, tradition, and religion, as well as their habits, is the surest way to have a successful experience. Appreciating their food and hospitality is essential.

Many places you may visit where there are protracted conflicts are like ours. We are a community-based society. Although there are more trends for individualism, we still believe that the family is a viable socioeconomic unit. If you live with a family or in a home adjacent to a family, you are accountable to this society at large and to the family hosting in particular.

Alice rented an apartment and shared it with her friend from Boston who was a classmate. One night they had a party, and people from both sexes attended. Some male friends stayed late. You might imagine the negative repercussions and all the negative thoughts Alice's neighbors created and formed. Alice had not realized that what she was doing would not be acceptable to everyone else. She didn't spend enough time listening to her neighbors and friends to see what behavior appropriate.

If you believe in constructive criticism, practice it in your own country. Since most of the time, your country is responsible for lots of negative things that have happened to the people on the Third World, you shouldn't expect the same level of criticism to be leveled at places your country has helped to oppress. You might be more confrontational; you might be free to talk about any subject, to wear whatever you like, or to move without limitations. You might talk about homosexual rights. This might be a taboo subject for some other cultures and traditions. It's important not to sell out your beliefs, but you should realize that in some places, people are not open even to speak these words. It is always good to be sensitive, respectful, and careful.

Most of the time, people are surviving, not really living. Avoid blaming the people you are working with. You are free to blame your government and your people, but be humble about your knowledge of the country you work in. you might be working at a different pace or better approach. Take into consideration people's sense of time and pace. Avoid being patronizing and condescending.

### Conclusion

North Americans working in areas other than their own country or region have a number of challenges:

- The challenge of how to balance the mainstream media and how to embark on an appropriate unlearning process.
- The challenge not to preach nonviolence at people and not to convey a delegitimization of their struggle to end apartheid, injustice, occupation, and colonial expansionism and power.
- The challenge of helping people shift their attitudes of blame, guilt, and victimization toward collective responsible.
- The challenge of humility and recognizing that you are not the savior of the people.
- The challenge not to be overwhelmed or burned out and to find mechanisms and healthy techniques to air out frustrations and approach difficulties with innovation, creativity, and vivid interaction with the surroundings.
- The challenge to cope with a different culture and its traditions in an unstable and uneasy environment
- The challenge not to over identify with the people while standing with them. Remember that their challenges are not identical to your challenges.
- The struggle of living in areas where boundaries and checkpoints are the landmarks. Be prepared to face limitations or even prevention of travel. Your personal freedom may be infringed on.