



IN THE ROUND

FINDING AN END TO CONFLICT IN THE MIDDLE EAST

*The latest installment of the Ambassador Roundtable series focused on the ongoing conflict and peace efforts between Israel and Palestine. A collective of informed and passionate experts gathered at the Birmingham Community House to discuss the topic. The group is an eloquent and learned example of how cool diversity can be. Their passion, however, meant that the moderator, **Ambassador publisher Denise Ilitch**, had her work cut out for her.*

The most logical opening question – How is the conflict between Israel and Palestine defined? – starts the conversation, eliciting detailed responses. Saeed Khan, a college instructor and expert on Islamic culture, suggests that, at less than 100 years, it’s a younger rift. It’s centered, he says, around the reallocation of land and people living in a small area. It’s not about religion, ideology or politics, as some would believe. It’s also the root, Dearborn-based Pastor Rani Abdulmesih adds, of a larger Arab-Israeli conflict that involves other Middle Eastern countries. Brenda Rosenberg, who has communicated with almost 500 Israeli and Arab organizations under the banner of peace, suggests that the PRIME Web site, written cooperatively by an Israeli and Palestinian author, provides a comprehensive outline of the struggle.

Aaron Ahuvia, a marketing professor at University of Michigan-Dearborn, eloquently weaves the passion of all involved into the history of the struggle. “It’s a conflict between two national groups,” he says, “both with deep historical and emotional attachments to the same piece of real estate, and both have been struggling to achieve victory over the other, which will never happen, or accommodation, which is difficult to get in touch with, emotionally.”

All participants agree that people on both sides of the decades-long issue want peace. Victor Begg, who chairs the Council of Islamic



Tim Attalla and Saeed Khan

Organizations of Michigan, even suggests that personal polling conducted during several tours through both places validate that fact. He was present at the White House when Palestinian Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin signed the Oslo Accords in 1993. The problem, and a part of the reason the Accords failed, he and Ahuvia say, is that a small but highly vocal minority of extremists opposed it.

It doesn’t help that Hamas, a group largely considered to be a terrorist organization and, therefore, excluded from peace talks, won the 2006 Palestinian elections.

Khan argues that the United States must also shoulder some of the blame. “You’ve got external forces which are driving what’s going on in the region,” he says. “And this is really unprecedented in world history, (where) colonization is dictated from the outside in.” Though it’s natural for neighbors to find ways to co-exist, he says, he wonders if the United States condescends to the two countries, as if resolution is beyond their ability.

Ilitch asks the participants if they believe the United States can successfully facilitate communication. They say yes, but there are obstacles. The media is one.

Rosenberg, who makes ultimate peace in the region her passion and life’s work, says dialogue never gets the same degree of press coverage

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as conflict. Too few media outlets, she says, noted Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud's willingness to call for an interfaith dialogue earlier this year to seek common ground between the nations. Imam Mohamad Mardini adds that a meeting between imams and rabbis in New York earlier this year was not covered by the press.

Khan, who contributes to the BBC World Service as an expert on Middle East issues, says, "The thing about the media (is) peace has become a political issue. And for some, it's become an issue for profit. And both of these are driving why they're finding the obstacles to peace. Peace should be an issue of policy."

solution and deserve our focus. Sleutelberg says people need a vision that shows how peace looks. He says it's more than the absence of war.

Aaron-Micael Beydoun, whose Jews of Lebanon blog promotes religious tolerance in his homeland, says, "Nonviolence is the only way, because violence creates hatred. Hatred will last long after peace is established. True peace is when there's true fraternity."

Ilitch's final question – How would you resolve the conflict if you were totally empowered? – elicits the shortest, most succinct responses. Deal with the real problems. Stop being combative. Be cooperative. Use the old model to forge a new future. Build bridges. Adopt America's system, which is pluralistic and idealistic.

"Palestinians were basically uprooted," Attalla says, "and that was the start of the problem. I believe Jews will never get the justice they deserve for (the Holocaust). I also believe Palestinians are never going to get the justice they deserve for what happened to them in Palestine. So I'm at a point where I'm trying to understand the reality, and say to each other, 'We have to survive.'" 👑 – Khary Kimani Turner



Ilitch, now attempting to move the discussion forward, asks the participants to identify the most misunderstood aspects of the conflict. There are a few. Ahuvia says that people on both sides of the issue "are absolutely convinced that they are willing to compromise and make peace, but the other side is not." He says both sides are incorrect in this notion. Khan notes a widespread sentiment that Israel was created to fulfill biblical prophecy, a belief that makes compromise more difficult.

Khan's suggestion draws Abdulmesih's take on the role religion will play in the conflict. He says creed is a part of the problem. It is also the only hope for a solution because leaders who meet with the right intentions will have to adopt "exegetical work" in order to overcome the xenophobia at the core of the matter.

Rabbi Arnie Sleutelberg, as well as attorney Tim Attalla, agree that "a two-state solution," in which both countries' right to exist as sovereign nations is recognized, has to be a part of the solution. Extremists, however, represent that small-but-vocal minority that doesn't necessarily want that.

The participants offer solutions that are imaginative and born of a deep understanding of the emotional and psychological scars that mar both sides. Abdulmesih says it's time to forgive and forget. Attorney Susie Ousachi, a member of the Chaldean Federation of America, says Israeli and Palestinian children who are allowed to grow up experiencing each others' culture and developing a natural respect for each other are the

PARTICIPANTS:

Rani Abdulmesih – Mother of the Savior Lutheran Church, Dearborn, pastor

Aaron Ahuvia – University of Michigan-Dearborn, marketing professor, Brit Tzedek v'Shalom (Jewish Alliance for Justice and Peace) executive board member

Tim Attalla – Seeds of Peace, board member

Victor Begg – Council of Islamic Organizations of Michigan, chairman

Aaron-Micael Beydoun – The Jews of Lebanon, founder

Saeed Khan – Wayne State University instructor; University of Detroit-Mercy adjunct; BBC World Service contributor/consultant

Mohamad Mardini – American Muslim Center director; Religious Programming in Region One, Michigan Dept. of Corrections director; Interfaith Roundtable member

Susie Ousachi – Chaldean Federation of America member

Brenda Rosenberg – Reuniting the Children of Abraham, executive producer; Commission on Interreligious Affairs, American Jewish Committee co-chair

Arnie Sleutelberg – Congregation Shir TikVah, rabbi

Sheldon Toll – Commission on Interreligious Affairs, American Jewish Committee member