

Arabs for conflict prevention face many challenges ahead

By Mayssam Zaaroura
Daily Star staff
Friday, August 05, 2005

Interview

This is the second of three interviews with the Arab delegation to the New York conference created to combat and prevent armed conflict. Samuel Rizk is a member of the Middle East delegation at the Global Conference for the Prevention of Armed Conflict and is the founder of the Beirut-based Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue.

NEW YORK: "While the Arab-Israeli conflict is very important, it is not the only conflict in the Arab world," pointed out Samuel Rizk, the regional initiator of the Arab Partnership for Conflict Prevention and Human Security. As part of a large delegation that traveled to the U.S. to take part in the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict - many of whose members had to face tough security restrictions to get there - Rizk is "neither blind nor oblivious" to regional developments; instead, he realizes there is much more going on in the region than typically makes headlines.

"We really care about the Arab-Israeli conflict ... but we need a just peace - just peace through peaceful means," said Rizk, who became involved in this field due to his interest in conflict resolution, his sense of justice and his belief in peace.

"There are so many conflicts in the Middle East; interpersonal and inter-communal - between the Arabs themselves."

There was a noticeable absence of Israelis in the regional delegation but, according to Rizk, "there is a reason why it is called the Arab partnership."

He added: "We have Palestinians in our delegation, but we are not going to get one person's agenda adopted by everyone."

But the challenge for the Partnership is to expand its membership. "The outreach process is relatively new because conflict prevention is highly politicized in our region," says Rizk.

The Arab Partnership - with member organizations and networks in Syria, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Iraq, the Gulf, Yemen and Sudan - understands that civil society has a vital role to play in making this change.

Another challenge is the widespread mentality of 'guns, gates and guards,' in keeping with which people try to protect themselves from, rather than prevent, conflict. The perception that "peace-building" is an impractical foreign concept also needs to be changed.

Yet another obstacle remains. This is the challenge of getting governments more interested in the work of civil society organizations, especially in the Arab world where governments often view CSOs as a threat to existing regimes.

Rizk said: "CSO's work has been met with varying degrees of success. Some [works] count as more successful than others. If we continue to fight conflict as individuals and organizations, we will bring more people out of the woodwork and show everyone that our approach is not threatening, not subversive. This attitude should cause governments to be more at ease. Maybe they will show more interest after this conference."