

Peace activist optimistic about country's future
Member of Lebanese Center for Policy Studies expresses hope despite what he calls the 'superficial masquerade' of current political activity

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Interview

This is the last in a series of interviews with the Arab delegation to the New York conference created to combat and prevent armed conflict. Ossama Safa is part of the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies.

NEW YORK, United States: Ossama Safa calls Lebanon's March 14 "Independence Intifada" and political upheaval the "reluctant revolution." A peace activist who specializes in training people in mediation and intervention in conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa, Safa was part of the Arab Partnership for the prevention of Armed Conflict and Human Security attending the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed conflict in the UN headquarters.

Safa, who is part of the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies and "isn't sure yet why he got into this field" - believes that what was dubbed the "Independence Intifada" after the assassination of former Premier Rafik Hariri, was "mobilized by the people but not entirely by the people."

"It was backed by politicians," he added. Following the assassination of Hariri, a backlash of demonstrations and events caused the Syrians to withdraw their troops on April 26 and parliamentary elections to be held on time.

According to Safa, "It didn't go very far. There was a long list of demands by youths and civil society organizations that were shunted aside in the interest of maintaining relations with Hizbullah, or working with General Michel Aoun."

"Opportunity for radical change has been ruined," he said.

But despite Safa's cynicism, the activist remains optimistic about the country's future - however, "only if true dialogue takes place."

And it is not the type of "superficial dialogue being bandied about between the politicians."

"What politicians are doing now is a superficial masquerade. It's the art of deceptive diplomacy and it's an insult to people's intelligence," he added.

"If [Walid] Jumblatt visits [Maronite patriarch Nasrallah Butros] Sfeir, they say this is reconciliation. But the wounds are still open. People still remember the war."

"The situation is actually scary because people are waiting to get back at each other. What we need is genuine reconciliation. There's no point in 'turning the page of the war'. The war needs to be dealt with properly."

Setting up a war museum, a justice commission or truth and apology commission are only some of the ways to deal with the war and its memories, believes Safa.

"We can't put a lid on this issue and pretend like it never happened in history. Lebanon cannot be a model in that way."

Safa's believes the main challenge in Lebanon right now is "making confessional politics irrelevant" - a thing of the past.

"I don't have a magic solution but people need to sit at a round table and scratch their heads and have dialogue."

"And what I mean by dialogue is not a polarizing debate. Not trying to convince others of your own version and trying to change their opinion. It's listening, empathizing, agreeing to disagree. Too many people believe in the magic wand of 'dialogue' - it won't work without absolute conviction," Safa insisted.

And regarding the current political trend?

"I am optimistic. There are some good people in government. The influence of regional powers and forces is all pushing toward an irreversible process of democracy and reform."

"We are being watched under a microscope. Grand theft, fraud and the robbery that have characterized the post-war years have to end - there is no choice but to end it. But we have a very arduous road ahead. We're late-comers to this field and we're under-achievers as far as human security and conflict resolution is concerned."