

Dear participants

Let me first of all thank you all, for traveling all the way from your respective countries and contexts just for the gift of sharing and supporting each other in those difficult times.

Our gathering here is meant to build bridges of understanding, reflect on our respective roles and responsibilities, seeking mutual support energizing and brainstorming on MENA Affairs through women leaders' lenses.

The sands of the Middle East are shifting; to be honest: the Middle East is burning. Wherever you stretch your sight you will find grievances and sorrows.

How come we couldn't avoid the tragedy unfolding? How come Middle Eastern communities were incapable of resolving their differences and challenges peacefully? Why conflict resolution and management are missing understanding in our Middle Eastern communities? Why the whole concept and the role of civil society is still a no go mechanism for many in the region? Is it about lack of understanding or is there something more?

I guess the ones sitting around this table the majority of who are women leaders, civil society leaders, they are courageous women who dared warning for the doom scenario unfolding before us.

As lawyers, women human rights defenders , civil society analysts....many among us defended democratic values and norms, fostered inclusiveness encouraging local communities to embrace their diversity and differences, to strengthen women roles and rights position to encompass and include marginalized groups and minorities, to live in respect of the rule of law building egalitarian peaceful and flourishing communities. We made no differences between a Muslim a Christian or a Jew, between a male and a female, between a conservative and a secular, between an Arab, Kurd, Shia, Ebadi, Sunni...we were the Middle East we dreamed of!

We failed, we failed terribly. Also the international community ignored the reality of the dynamics of the Middle East; it was business and only business as usual. Don't understand me wrongly I have nothing against business, my husband is a fervent businessman I'm encouraging and supporting as I do believe in the power of business to open up and build bridges of solidarity as well. But business without a right based approach and human rights dimension is doomed to fail in the long term. Business should also lead to constructive cooperation.

Back to the failure, the Arab spring took the world by surprise. But for insiders it was no surprise. The Arab spring was the symptom of a fatal dysfunctionality: the incapacity to evolve towards smooth progressive inevitable necessary social change. The Arab spring was a desperate call for reforms by communities refusing to become the pariah of the civilized world: humiliated by stagnation, unproductivity, bad governance, plagued by corruption inequality and lack of individual freedoms.

Today, here and there I still here voices of disenchantment about the Arab outbreak. Those voices are certainly not aware of the fact that the Arab spring was a loud scream of agony of desperate communities refusing to die.

With the Arab spring early era, we saw reformists' minds disappearing behind bars; we watched once more with our eyes wide open the break-down of communities, the rise and the reign of terror. We witnessed these heinous shifts. We were all paralyzed by the extent of horror incapable of avoiding that the power of darkness were to dominate and destroy all what was beautiful in the Middle East and beyond.

The forces of darkness are growing englobing and expanding fed by the frustrations and negativism around us.

Should we give up our struggle or do we have to stand up as women leaders who hail from the soil of this shifting landscape of the Middle East?

My answer is clear : never give up! Not only we should brainstorm among us, sharing our concerns with the international community but we should also do our best to lead local communities in those difficult times. Continue our unbeatable combat for fair and equitable communities, working on peace building and conflict resolution, supporting the rule of law and good governance, refusing corruption and lawless. Encouraging our peers to be part of the internal and the international process shaping their lives and the future of their communities. Refuse to be ruled by the reign of terror and fear.

We should continue to believe no matter the humiliation inflicted to our local communities by those barbarian acts of terror that we will recover and be capable of regenerating from the abyss. That terror, the human miseries around us, the refugees plight are unnatural and definitely not our state of being. Yes we should dream that a better future is possible but we must work hard to really make it possible.

Our world is rapidly changing and we should not be defeated by the extent of horror and sorrow. Giving up is leaving the space to the negative rhetoric to rule our communities by means of violence, hatred , polarization, division... hijacking and eliminating Middle Eastern peaceful identities, heritage and culture. Creating new fictive identities and cultures, making many among us feeling strangers in their own world. Giving up is accepting the vanishing of a millennial civilization: Not Islamic, not Jewish not Christian....it was a civilization that encompasses them all and was all of them.

Last but not least: the world affairs need more consensus and inclusiveness. The chaos at international affairs level created a vacuum impacting vulnerable communities as the ones in the MENA region. I close by expressing the hope that our concerns do not only reach out to our communities and regional leaderships but also to the international community:

I'm counting on you Senator Sandy Papas to support us voicing our concerns and call for better concerted solutions to the MENA affairs and world affairs (like humanitarian crisis response and settlement of political long standing regional crises). It is not only in our hands but also part of the international community commitment to the peaceful state of the world. We should set aside our differences in order to solve together the structural problems that face us. It is urgent.