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Bring women to the table

Saffie Meek | August 2, 2006

The crisis in the Middle East is in desperate need of intervention. Different tactics have been tried over the years – from peace talks between national leaders to outright war.

Sadly, these efforts have not achieved the positive and secure results they should have.

I propose a new idea to achieve resolution: Bring the women to the table. Women will be the key to developing any true sense of reconciliation in the Middle East. Why is this? Women are known for being peacemakers, opting for nonviolent means of conflict resolution. They seek unilateral agreement and fair treatment. Women desire security and usually do not allow pride and ego to dominate their decisions.

As written in a 2000 paper for the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes: "Where women have joined organizations or decision-making bodies in sufficient numbers, they have created a more collaborative atmosphere, characterized by mutual respect, and have also sought consensus, rather than a winner-take-all solution."

Think about families worldwide. When conflict arises between children, who is called upon to settle the disputes? Mom.

She is the one who seeks to understand the sides of the conflict, reassure all parties that they will be heard, attempt mediation, decide upon fair punishment or settlement and then establish a method of preventing a recurrence.

It is the same method of conflict resolution used in corporate human resource departments to resolve internal disputes.

It only makes sense that this method be used to mediate conflict on a larger scale. In addition to innate peacemaking skills, women have a great deal of influence over members of their households. In the Middle Eastern culture, in particular, mothers hold a special level of devotion from their children. Therefore, mothers have the ability to sway the attitudes and decisions of their families.

Armed with the respect of leaders and organizations, these women are the transition leaders needed to get groups to the negotiation table, encourage more women to

participate and develop social programs to help maintain peace.

Women have a history of success in conflict resolution on a large scale. The Initiative for Inclusive Security network (formerly known as Women Waging Peace) has been connecting women experts with policymakers across the world since 1999. They state that sustainable peace is achieved best by a diverse, citizen-driven approach.

Their success in Colombia with its long history of political violence is a perfect model for the Middle East. As documented in the 2003 U.N. Human Development Report and the 2004 U.S. Institute of Peace report, women – in addition to indigenous peoples and Afro-Colombians – are at the forefront of resistance efforts there.

After years of unsuccessful attempts to end the fighting, a peace movement that included women was able to develop a dialogue between the political factions and guerrilla paramilitary groups. These talks allowed the input from nongovernmental segments of society and established a forum for negotiation.

Women could conceivably accomplish the same thing in the Middle East. Already, individuals and organizations across the region are working on this endeavor. Their efforts have focused on education, social reform and humanitarian aid. The grass-roots work that these women do through nongovernmental organizations could reach the hearts and minds of not only the people but also the factions in the Middle East.

The international community needs to invite women experts and nongovernmental organizations to participate in negotiations as representatives. They will be more likely to succeed in promoting an immediate end to hostilities and in bringing the necessary minds to the negotiating table.

As the old adage goes: You catch more flies with honey than you do with vinegar. And in the case of leveling out the misery in the Middle East, women have a better chance of winning the war of terror than the military action might.

Saffia Meek is the operations director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations Dallas / Fort Worth chapter. She can be reached at info@cairdfw.org.