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Pigeons won't be enough this time

by Joan Chittister

From *Where I Stand*

In the First World War, when diplomacy had ended and war was at full bore, when communication systems were archaic and innocent people were trapped on both sides of the line, we used carrier pigeons to shuttle messages from one side of a border to the other. This time, it seems all we have left to use if we want to know what's happening on the other side are people. Common people.

Diplomacy in the Middle East is at a standstill now, too.

Our communication systems have broken down.

Innocent people on both sides of multiple borders have begun to look at one another with fear and loathing.

There are few left who care for both.

Politicians are not talking to politicians: Israel is not talking to Lebanon. We are not talking to Syria. Iran and Syria are concerned about Lebanon and disturbed about U.S. willingness to allow unmitigated violence against innocent people to continue. More than that, culture and languages make us strangers to one another. And yet, understanding is the only hope we have of peace.

People, in general, have no idea what is really going on. We see one another on our TV screens -- screaming, shooting, crying, dying, of course -- but by then it is far too late.

So, as Convener and Co-chair of the Women's Global Peace Initiative, Dena Merriam and I decided to make some contacts ourselves, however small, however simple those contacts might be.

As professional religious figures here, we decided, having created conversations in both Israel and Palestine, that this time we wanted to enlarge the dialogue. We wanted to go to Syria to talk to religious leaders there, to try to make connections among the groups involved in this conflict who count most -- the Israeli, Palestinian, Syrian and American people themselves.

The first step to opening that conversation was a conversation with U.N. Ambassador Mohammed Javad Zarif from Iran and Syrian Ambassador to the United States Imad Moustapha.

In this column, I want to include you in that conversation, too. I'll tell you the four main themes I heard and the conclusions I drew from them. You decide what the answers say to you. Do they make sense to you or not. Why? Because the way you judge these positions can be very important to our own country in the near future.

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The two ambassadors, in separate conversations, made the following points:

First, however 'isolationist' we might all want to be right now, the truth is that we are deeply involved in the Middle East. I asked Ambassador Zarif: 'What do your instincts tell you about this present situation -- the struggle about nuclear energy with Iran, the relationship of Syria to Lebanon, the unchecked Israeli invasion of Lebanon?' He answered: 'It is the most serious, most depressing moment in my 27 years of public service. Anything can happen at any moment because no one is in control.'

Point: This is a dangerous situation. Don't discount it. Don't shrug it off. Don't simply assume that it will end next week. What happens in the Middle East will affect us all.

Second, none of us can afford to excuse ourselves from the issues, as in 'This is not our problem.' 'What's the most dangerous thing about it?' I asked. The ambassador responded to this question just as forthrightly as he had the first. 'There are no moderates left on the streets,' he said. 'And in the Arab world, anti-Americanism is rising in all parts of the population.'

Point: People are taking sides everywhere, pointing fingers, laying blame. The longer this goes on, the more hardened positions become. It is necessary to bring people together to work out these issues, not to isolate them.

In our own lives, despite the fact that we are far removed from the principals in this struggle, from the bombing and the screaming and the terrified babies, from the women running through the streets from their shattered homes, we are the attitude-builders in our own country. We must bring objectivity and concern to every conversation here if U.S. policy itself is to be more help than harm in these negotiations.

Third, until both sides believe their concerns are being heard, the tension is not going to go away. 'Ask yourself,' Ambassador Moustaffa said to us in the consulate office in Washington, 'how it can be that despite over 50 years of struggle, there is only one side to the story?'

Point: There is a great deal more to the present struggles than the dedicated intention of rabid radicals to destroy Israel. Israel, reasonable people everywhere know -- even people in the Middle East, has a right to

exist. Existence is not what's at question: land is, human rights are, access to resources are. These issues must be resolved at the highest levels and in behalf of each of the groups involved if the radicals in each group are to be marginalized.

Fourth, no negotiating can happen until there is a cease-fire in Lebanon.

Of all the things that must be done in this situation, what must be done first? we asked both ambassadors. The answer came swift and clear: Your government must engage. They must talk to us. And your government must demand the cease-fire. Why us? we asked. Because, the ambassadors agreed, it is the United States who has the ties with Israel that can make it happen and because the longer it takes us to do it, the more we stand to hurt, not help, both Israel and this country itself. This is the first time that Israel has been met with enough force to require it to negotiate, one ambassador said.

Point: The longer this situation goes on uncurbed, the stronger Hezbollah will become. The more support it will get from average Muslims who have remained neutral in the face of this conflict for years. The more the United States will be seen as the real problem, the most important target for radicals of all stripes.

From where I stand, I think it is crucial to remember, for the sake of our own sense of perspective and depth of decisions, that it was a Muslim who foiled the plot of extremists against planes headed to the United States this week. Why is that important? Because it is a sign, however small, that the whole Muslim world is not against us. Yet. But they will be -- unless we change our policies. Until we strengthen our relations with Lebanon so that there is no need for Muslim countries to have to look to Hezbollah for their security, they will get it where they can and fight what they think they must in order to keep it.

We still have enough time for people, not pigeons, to make the contacts we need to avert this disaster. But, perhaps, not as much time as we think.

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