

As Obama orates in Berlin, Moosa Arendt wonders what an alternative message from the First Lady would sound like.

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Good morning, ladies and gentleman. I want to thank all of you, especially the young people who are here today.

It is such an honour to be here. As First Lady, I often accompany my husband to various places and we meet Presidents, Heads of State and First Ladies. My husband, as President spends a lot of time on very complex problems.

However, of the most important aspects of our visits to various countries is meeting young people. You are the ones who shape the future. It is a time when one is most unencumbered where one could do things that can leaving lasting impacts. Young people are often the ones who give of themselves to make the world a better place. When I look around in this war-torn, shattered city I see the young people who will rebuild what has been destroyed. We are honoured to be in the presence of hope.

My husband and I we come from circumstances which were trying. We did not have much. But you come from a society that had young people like Abdullah ibn Abbas who collected the Quran when he was about 13 years old. His potential was recognised and he made the decision to be part of the generation that said "Yes we can" more than 1400 years ago. Abdullah ibn Abbas was not defined by others but he had an open mind. When he tended his sheep he saw that he had met someone with a fresh perspective on old problems. The Abdllah ibn Abbas's of today have the social media that will allow them to connect with other young people to tell their stories of hope and inspiration. He dreamt of the kind of community that could be built where everyone could have a fair shake.

Despite the sectarian debris that you have around you I am extremely optimistic. As young people, in the tradition of Prophets Yahya and Joseph who worked with other people, were the wind beneath one another's sails, choosing to rise above sectarian conflicts and prejudices and made revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen. Some of these have not turned out as some have hoped. In Egypt in particular the revolutionary youth were not as organised as they should have been. Yet they were the catalyst. A young person, Bu'azzizi set himself ablaze and Tunisia deposed a dictator. The youth of Yemen were there day after day. We however, together with our close ally have managed to smother those youth. In Bahrain we have managed to cripple the hopes of young people.

However, it is up to you to see and point out the error of our sectarian ways. We believe that they young people of Syria have the possibilities of healing this fractured nation. We are sorry for the mess that we have created.

I wish you well. Let me introduce someone who is as excited about you as I am. Ladies and gentlemen, my husband, the President.

The President.

Thank you. Thank you. Please be seated.

To the young people I say that you live in a world of instant communication. You the young people of Syria, have been through a difficult time. However, you are also the hope of Syria. You are a generation that has to build bridges across the sectarian divide that has exploded in Syria and the neighbouring countries in the past few years. There are communities that are enduring severe pain. However, you should take your cue from Northern Ireland.

One abandoned factories will have to be rebuilt. Bombed out industrial sites and residential neighbourhoods will have to be reborn. Damascus, Homs, Aleppo will become chic again. Your efforts to rediscover the unimportance of sectarian affiliations, or mathahibs as the clergy would call it, will one day reap benefits. It will one day be as ordinary as it was before for someone to come from an Allawi father, with a Shafii mother and an agnostic grandfather. That is the vision that you will have to have for yourself. We are sorry for having inflamed the sectarian divisions whereby today you have roadblocks and checkpoints and militants and government soldiers patrolling different parts of your various cities. Syria was not perfect. You did not have democracy but you were secure. We used the graffiti on the wall in Der'a and the clumsiness of the government to push for our strategic goals but things got out of hand. We hope that one day again, you might rediscover joy in be a Damascus that will be the oldest city in the world. The Damascus where Saul became Paul. That road still stands. The destiny of Syria is in your hands.

Young people must recall the importance of the role models in your own culture. I will mention the names of a few young people who have shaped society in the days of Prophet Mohammed. They are amongst others Usama ibn Zayd ibn Haritha, Amr ibn Hazm, Ali ibn Abi Talib, Abdullah ibn Abbas, Abdullah ibn Masood, Ayesha bint Abi Bakr, Fatima bint Mohammed, Hasan ibn Ali, Abdullah ibn Zubayr, Mu'adh ibn Jabal and Ja'far ibn Abi talb.. Then there were young Prophets Isa ibn Maryam, Yahya, Yusuf and Moses. When you seek to transcend the sectarian hatred that is aflame today look at these role models and the young people in Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Bahrain. Sometimes we have not lived up to the hopes that they had vested in us. But you can raise your head above the parapets of violence and mistrust. You can choose to wage peace not war. This conflict might seem intractable today. But you can do it. In reaching across the divides of sectarianism and pain you can find one another. The future of Syria lies in your hands not in the hands of those who go from meeting to meeting planning another sectarian bloodbath.

In the Quran it is stated that “ Hold onto the rope that extends from Allah, do not be divided amongst yourselves and remember the grace of Allah upon you when you were sworn enemies and He united your hearts and you became by His grace brothers (and sisters) and you were on the edge of a fire and He saved you from it. In that way Allah clarifies His signs so that you might be guided” (3:153).

You will have to rely on your cultural resources to get this right. It has happened in this area

before that a people disunited are united by the grace of Him. We cannot help you. In fact you had best not ask us for assistance because we have not done particularly well until now. At the moment you are on the edge of a fire. Only He can save you. But as He says in your Holy Book "And My mercy encompasses everything" (7:156). In 3:159 you are encouraged to be lenient and merciful towards one another. Forgive the hatreds that have built up lately. You have a lot of work to do. Wounds and communities will need a lot of help to fix up the pain that still hangs in the air.

This job of building peace will not be a moment but a long process. In Rwanda a million Hutus and Tutsis died. They had to find one another. Yeats once wrote "peace comes dropping slow" That however does not mean that you should drag your peace-loving feet like the older generation has been doing for some time. The work for peace in Syria does not take place in conferences. It takes place one-to-one, heart-to-heart, family-by-family, street by street, neighbourhood by neighbourhood, village by village and town by town.

In an interconnected world, what happens in one place makes an impact on every other place. The efforts that you will be making in Syria will inspire young people all over the Arab and non-Arab world.

You have to get this effort for peace right. The world depends on you. There are people living with conflict all over. If you get this right then you will bring hope to other young people to create a world of hope where they find themselves. You can show them that there is a world beyond sectarian, ethnic, religious and tribal conflict.

Some of the people in positions of authority will have to make the necessary political compromises needed to plant the seeds for peace. There are many who try to make peace but are cut down by their own side. The current divisions of neighbourhoods along sectarian lines i.e. Sunnis, Shias, Allawites, Christians were never causes of hatred in modern Syria.

Peace however is not only about politics. It is also fundamentally about attitudes and divisions that are within ourselves. Those sectarian prejudices and biases do not exist as objective facts but they do create concrete obstacles generation after generation.

I know that we have had our own conflicts. Hundred of thousands died in our Civil war. Some people fought for the right to treat other human beings as their property. We have had an election where some questioned my right to stand for the highest office in the land. We still have people who use every trick in the book to prevent citizens from casting their ballot. For some segregation should still be the order of the day. Buses, drinking fountains, schools, swimming pools etc should still be segregated. Politicians often failed to provide leadership. Young people provided the muscle to push social change forward. Young people provided the vision and energy to push our society forward towards peace, tolerance, justice and fairness. We still struggle with some issues. However, we are better placed today that we were a generation or two ago. Building peace takes time. But the arc of history does favour those who seek peace. You do not wait to build a better tomorrow. You start working for it today. You can decide whether you will be kind and gracious to your neighbour from across the sectarian divide. The

decision to treat people with respect is yours. You cannot duck or dive. Whether you hang out with other young people from another sect is a choice that you have to make. You have to decide whether you will tell those who say that they have eaten livers for Syria that you take a stand against hatred. It is up to you to decide to stoke sectarian hatred or to build peace. Politicians and civil society leaders will seek to negotiate peace terms in smoke-filled rooms. The building of peace and the delivery thereof is in your hands.

The peace-building process will be unlike Oslo which is, I must admit, despite Tony's misplaced enthusiasm, propaganda. Real peace requires that you make genuine moves in the direction of the other. You are the one to answer whether you will respond to the situation with your worst or best instincts. Every day is a day of truth. You have to decide whether you will continue the sectarian fights or whether you want to unite hearts and rebuild a country whether there is still a community that speaks the language of Prophet Jesus.

As long as you build the unity that your country so desperately needs know that we will stand by you. We will work closely with your political leaders in order to create an environment where your economy can be rebuilt because once people have jobs then they will have concrete investment in the future.

We will create opportunities for training of Syrian scientists and professionals who will come back to Syria to provide expert input into the rebuilding process.

As a community organiser I know how hard it is to build grassroots structures. If you do the right things and get things right it might be possible for you to show that one of the most hated walls in the region can go in the same directions as the Berlin wall. It is you, the young people who have to imagine Syria as it should be. It is you who have to knock down the walls of pain.

You are fortunate to live in a time when young people all over the world are making their voices heard. These are the echoes of the voices of the young people that I had mentioned earlier. Your attempts to build peace will be hard and will require courage. But you can do it. You can provide the social pressure that will force politicians to make the necessary compromises for a better future for Syria. Your innocence and work for peace will make the politicians aware again and again that "All we are saying, is give peace a chance" (John Lennon).

I have confidence that you will choose and embrace the task of working for peace in Syria. If you do that then I will use all the resources of my office to be the wind beneath your sails. Look beyond the destruction of Damascus, Aleppo and Homs. The best days of Syria are ahead. Its young people are committed to that.

God Bless you and God Bless Syria and the people of Syria.