

Imad Karam  
Initiatives of Change International  
Presenting Assaad Chaftari (Fighters for Peace)  
Córdoba, 15th May 2019

Good evening. Salam alaykum. I don't know if it's just me but I feel we need a bit of a stretch. So, if you would join me in just standing up, stretching, yawning or jumping. Let's just get the energy. Move your legs. Thank you.

Such an inspiration to see those faces and to hear those voices of the future, and I do want to emphasize the gratitude that we all have to KAICIID for enabling the Youth Training and the Youth Seminar.

My name is Imad Karam, as Jacques introduced me. I am Palestinian from Gaza City, living in London. I am the Executive Director of Initiatives of Change International.

Initiatives of Change, just a brief word, is a global network of people of diverse cultures and backgrounds, who are committed to changing society through inspiring, equipping and accompanying change-makers in the pursuit of a just and peaceful world. And just that, that vision of a just and peaceful world and the reality that we live in today end just the gap. Our approach is that to change situations you need to change people. And we try to create the space to inspire that change in people's motives and behaviours.

Because we believe that when people change, situation changes.

It is my honour, my pleasure to introduce a dear friend of mine, a colleague, a comrade in this journey of changing the world. A man who has been giving his life to peace, for peace, after he has given so many of the same life for war and conflict. I am talking about Assaad Chaftari, from Lebanon, who was one day the head of security for the Lebanese forces, the Christian militia, during the Lebanese civil war. Assaad is and was responsible for the death of many, obviously on the other side, Muslims, including Palestinians. The war ended after so many years, and those who were involved all went on a journey. Some a journey of power, some a journey of lost lives, and some a journey of rebuilt lives. Assaad will give us a glimpse of his life journey but one turning point I would just like to, or a highlight I would like to just mention in this brief introduction is that, in the year 2000, he wrote a letter of apology to all his victims and that letter was published in one of the Lebanese main newspapers. And in the recent years, I think it was in 2014, five years ago, Assaad founded, with other militia leaders who used to fight on the opposing side, if you like, they founded something called Fighters for Peace, and he and his colleagues across the divide have spoken to more than 15.000 children and young people in schools and universities trying to pass on the message: Never to go back to what he and his generation have experienced. I think I should stop here. It is my pleasure, Assaad, over to you. Please welcome Assaad Chaftari.

### **Assaad Chaftari, Fighters for Peace**

Good evening. Maybe you applauded too soon. You'd better listen to what I have to say first, maybe you won't agree (Jacques Moreillon: "Maybe they applauded Imad, not you"). (laughing) OK. I agree then.

I was brought up in a Christian neighbourhood, in a Christian family, I studied in a -Christian school and then in a Christian university. Yes, I had some colleagues in school who were Muslims, but for me they were not the real Muslims. Because the real Muslims were the Muslims I heard about, or I saw on bad news on TV. These were Christianised for me, or somehow Christianised, so they were good people. For me the Muslims were bad people. They were ugly people, lazy people, dirty people, and worse than that, they reproduced a lot in order to win on a demographic level what they could not get on a political level in Lebanon.

We were the elite of our country. We were given power by God and we still, some of the Christians of Lebanon still repeat it. And then, we were the heirs of the Phoenicians, and then the French gave us the power at the end of their mandate because we were better than them. For me they were also traitors, because they believed in the "umma" (Islam) and not in Lebanon, and for me, Lebanon was really everything, the centre of the world. They wanted to replace the cedar by the palm tree, because the palm tree represents Islam for some reason. This is what I heard, and I really believed all this. They wanted us to leave the West and become and live as they used to live in the desert. And that did not work for me.

Later on, when the Palestinians came to Lebanon, in 48, and were very well received by everybody, Christians and Muslims, I was not yet born, of course, in 48, but in 65, 68, 69, when PLO (Palestine Liberation Organisation) started to become active in Lebanon, and then Lebanon was forced to sign an agreement in Cairo giving the authority to the Palestinians to use the Lebanese soil as a territory for actions against Israel. For me, this was a catastrophe, because that meant that we lost Lebanon, we lost our authority on our own soil.

Many incidents happened between the Christians and the Palestinians Militias later on, with the army in 73, and this is where I really felt that I should step in, because if the army was asked to go back to its barracks that meant that nobody could save Lebanon anymore but the Christians, and me and my cousins and neighbours we got organised until I joined a Christian party, which had its own militia, as everybody did in the past.

During the war, I fought as a good Christian, or what I thought to be being a good Christian, defending a Christian Lebanon, a Western idea of Lebanon, and fighting against them. So "them" was the Palestinians, the leftists and the Muslims.

Very soon, I found myself climbing the hierarchy of my old militia until I became a very important figure in the intelligence and security service and my task was to defend the

Christians and to weaken the enemy. And you can imagine what I did during this ugly and dirty civil war. But what's important is that I went back home after having given orders, for example, to attack a certain Muslim personality or Palestinian personality, or giving orders also to kill some of the prisoners we held because we found they were guilty; this is something, but getting home with a clear conscience because I was doing a holy war is something else. I had a clear conscience.

Anyhow, to cut the story short, I took part in negotiations, in 1985, which were supposed to put an end to the civil war. But I represented the Christians as a technician: we want a share of the cake, you will take that share of the cake, we agree, we disagree, until this agreement was signed. At a certain level, some of the Christians thought that we had given too much to the Muslims, and they made a bloody coup against us, and all of a sudden, instead of being one of the heroes of the Christian militia, I became a traitor. I had to leave the Christian area and go live among them. I did not think I would survive one day.

It is then, in these very black days, when I met Initiatives of Change. I was full of hatred against the Muslims, and now against my new enemies also, the Christians themselves. I wanted everyone to think like me, to behave like me and to have my own vision. Do you think that I loved Initiatives of Change? No, I hated them because they really changed my life into something that I never would have thought I would become. I went through very tough days, when they asked me their first question: "You want to change everybody. Are you ready to change what is in yourself? To change yourself?" Of course, I was a great guy, I had nothing to change in me. Then they smiled and asked me some other questions about my values, "where are you regarding these values?" Well, I did not... I had not given this any thought during the war, you know, but now I had time for that, and I started trying to avoid these quiet times they ask me to take part into, where you sit by yourself and try to understand the will of your conscience or the will of God in your life. So, I ran away, wherever there was noise, people, anything but sitting by myself in a room, in a closed room. But little by little, and I think that at this level God insists, I dared to look into that mirror and that day, I did not recognize myself. I saw a beast, with blood on the hands. And I realised that I was killing in the name of God, and Jesus, who came and told us only one thing: "Love each other". Not "each other as Christians", but as human beings, as His own creatures.

Of course, the path was very difficult, the road was very tough, just facing what I did, looking at that past, you know, full of sorrow, pain, blood, regrets,... I almost killed myself, more than once. Then another idea I heard within Initiatives of Change, is "Stop being a victim of your past, a victim of the others, and become responsible". And this is what I dared to try to be.

Meanwhile, I joined some dialogue groups, organised by Initiatives of Change –Lebanon during the war. There were doing this under my nose, imagine that, Christian and Muslims meeting and so on. When I joined them, I had prepared a list of what I had to say to the Muslims. I read

my list, of course, and I saw everybody smile until another Muslim, a new comer, stood up and read a much longer list than mine about what he had to say against the Christians. And it is there that I realised that I knew my own truth but I did not carry the full truth. The Truth is the truth of everybody, not only mine. I discover also that I have a lot of misconception or wrong ideas, maybe most of what I had heard about Muslims was wrong.

I discovered to my surprise that they had names, Ahmad, Ali, Khadija, Alia, they were not “them”; that they had families, for which they cared; that they had their own way to live, that we will maybe never be the same, but my main lesson was to decide to listen to what they had to say. Not only know what I will say but try to listen to what they had to say, and discover to my surprise too that many things were better than my set of ideas. And I had to change my opinions and ideas to add some of what I heard from them. We became friends, and we started working together and this was also a discovery for me. That Muslims and Christians in Lebanon could work together for a common, profitable project that could help the whole society, not only my clan, my people and my own.

In the year 2000, as Imad explained, I heard my son come back one day from school and say to his mom that his friend told him that when he comes near a mosque, he feels sick of disgust. And then I said to myself “my God, my son will live through the process I went through because of my ignorance of the other”. I sat with him, I explained everything to him, I explained how ugly and wrong I was during the war, and how wrong I was not to come forward and try to understand the other before making of them my enemy.

And I told that God insists. Twelve years I’ve been running away from something that He spelt to me. I am not crazy, no. He said “Assaad you have to ask for forgiveness for your deeds.” But after I heard my son, it was clear that for the sake of my son, his generation, the future, I had to express publicly my regret for what I had done and ask for forgiveness. It was clear for me that to build peace, peace is not pro-bono, does not come from free. There is a price to pay, and if that price was my own reputation, my ego, and maybe my life, to be killed by... I don’t know who, I had to do it, and say the truth about what had happened and where I went wrong during the war. So I wrote this letter of apology which went in the media. It was held 5 days in the agency, in the media agency because they were not sure that it would go peacefully, and they wanted to save me, to protect me until I had to call them again and insist that the letter was published.

Since then, I am dedicated to changing people’s hearts and mainly to ask youth: get out of your comfort zone and dare have the curiosity to go and meet the person you are afraid of, or you want to avoid, or already hate, and check by yourselves if what you are hearing of them, about them is true or not and you will be shocked.

Thank you.