

ACKNOWLEDGING ONE'S RESPONSIBILITIES TO BUILD PEACE

Friday 27 september, 10:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m., Or room



Richard Werly, Wadiaa Khoury, Assaad Chaftari and Peter Shambrook

Few veterans of a civil war are so open about their mistakes and about the fact that their judgements of the other, the foreigner, were based on prejudice. Assaad Chaftari is one of them. 'I have blood on my hands,' he said, standing at the front of the room. 'You don't see it, but I see it.' He wasn't even 20 years old when civil war broke out in his country, Lebanon. Around him, in the Christian community, the 'other', the enemy, was the Muslim. 'I was never told about their qualities, only their faults. I only heard one thing: Muslims were bad and evil.' So the young Assaad committed himself to his country, a Christian Lebanon, and became responsible for intelligence for the Lebanese Christian militia of the Lebanese forces during the civil war, which resulted in between 150,000 and 250,000 victims from 1975 to 1990. 'I was carrying out a task that I considered

sacred. I believed I was the last protector of Christianity in the East.'

While he stopped himself from directly killing civilians, he made important decisions, even if it meant ordering the deaths of opposing fighters. But at the end of the war, when a peace agreement was rejected by some of the Christians, Assaad was driven out of his community and forced to live in a Muslim zone. 'I thought I wouldn't survive it,' he recalled. However, he had decisive encounters within the Initiatives and Change movement, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) whose objective is to unite and train all those who wish to work to promote peace. His life then took an unexpected turn. Ten years after the end of the war, he published a letter of apology for his actions during the war in a national newspaper. 'In the mirror I saw a monster. It's hard to wake up. That's where I met 'the other' and understood that he was like me.'

Do these deeply rooted prejudices still exist among populations? Assaad Chaftari believes that, contrary to what one might believe, the means of communication facilitated by the Internet have not brought people together as much, as everyone sits in an information bubble, which only confirms their beliefs. Wadiaa Khoury, founder of the Lebanese NGO Teachers

MODERATION

Richard Werly, Journalist and correspondent for France and Europe for the daily newspaper, Blick

SPEAKERS

Assaad Chaftari, Co-founder of Fighters for Peace in Lebanon

Wadiaa Khoury, Founder of the Lebanese NGO Teachers as Agents of Social Change

Peter Shambrook, Historian, Middle East specialist, consultant to the Balfour Project

as Agents of Social Change, was just a child when Assaad Chaftari was a soldier, engulfed in a haze of bombing raids and shunted from shelter to shelter. 'But who was right? And where does this conflict come from?' she asks herself today. A visit by Pope John Paul II, requesting a consultation with the Lebanese people in Beirut in May 1997, completely changed her view of events. 'He made us understand that Lebanon wasn't a country like the others but a country with a message, of conviviality. 'It was a shock,' she recalled. It was the beginning of a long internal struggle.

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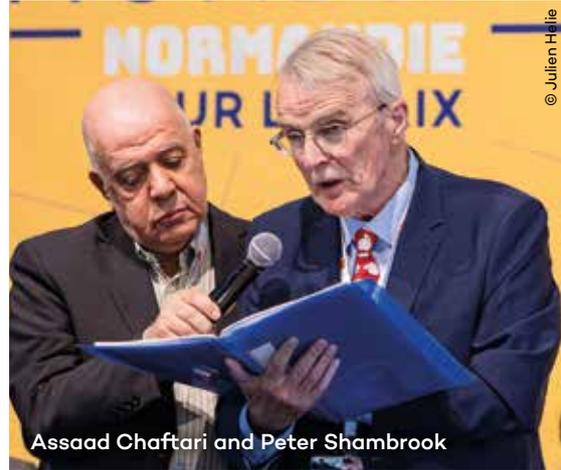
Assaad Chaftari

How can we work together with a community that has long been considered our enemy, the Muslims, and whose religious foundations are so prejudiced against our own religion? 'I was locking myself into this reasoning, but I had to open up.' A meeting with a Shiite Imam changed everything. The Imam explained to her that when he spends more than two weeks in his village, he begins to develop fear-based scenarios, telling himself that the Christians and the Sunnis want to eradicate his community. 'I told him, «Me too». We realised that we had to intermingle to shut down these judgements, because we're a wounded people.'

By experiencing what the other feels, then we can also better understand their fears and suffering.



Watch the full debate on YouTube



Assaad Chaftari and Peter Shambrook

With Initiative and Change, Wadiaa Khoury, who was then only 20 years old, joined a leadership programme and spent a year in India and East Asia in the aftermath of the attacks of 11th September 2001. 'These tragic attacks changed the way Westerners looked at Arab peoples, and I was the victim of confusion because I was taken for a Muslim. I was treated as a terrorist, even though I am a Christian. 'I experienced what the Muslims of Lebanon were going through,' she says.

This process of recognising everyone's responsibilities cannot be done without the work of historians, such as Peter Shambrook, a Middle East specialist and consultant to the Balfour Project. In his latest book, *Politics of Deceit* (2023), this British-born historian investigated the origins of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and exposed Britain's responsibility in Palestine. For seven years, he dissected everything, to arrive at two conclusions. 'The war for control of Palestine began in our Foreign Office during World War I. The British government promised this region, which was under its protectorate, to the Arabs in 1915.

But two years later it promised it to the Jews too. The same land was promised to two peoples. No British government has ever acknowledged this; in fact, they have proclaimed the opposite. 'My book suggests that it is time for us as a nation to acknowledge our past mistakes,' he concluded.