

# *Interreligious Peacebuilding at War: Finding Hope and Justice*

**Prof. Mohammed Abu-Nimer**

**The 41st Niwano Peace Prize Presentation Ceremony  
May 14, 2024**

## **Al Salam Alikum and Warm Greetings**

Dear honorable guests and our honorable host Dr. Hiroshi Niwano, the Chairperson of the Niwano Peace Foundation.

I am honored and humbled by the Niwano Peace Prize Committee selection and your endorsement of me as the 41st Niwano Peace Prize holder. It is with great honor and humility that I accept this prize for the year 2024.

By receiving this award, I am recognizing the thousands of peace makers I worked and collaborated with around the world, especially in Sri Lanka, Mindanao, Palestine, Nigeria, the Arab region, Europe and USA, and many others where I worked on interreligious peacebuilding. This award is to recognize all our work together. On a personal level, Ilham Nasser, my partner, and my spouse is the one who deserves the most recognition for her patience and consistent support of my work and career.

“When you do things from your soul, you feel a river moving in you, a joy.” — Jalaluddin Rumi<sup>1</sup>

I start my greetings to you all with Al Salam Alikum, “Peace Be Upon You” which is the most common greeting among Muslims and Arabic speakers in general. The term peace or Salam is used on a daily basis in Muslim prayers. Like many other cultures and societies, the term and desire to have Peace is not strange to Muslims.

I have been raised with a family narrative of seeking peace and mediating conflicts. I lived in a very ethnically and religiously diverse community that coexisted peacefully, until certain governmental policies and internal sectarian dynamics tore it apart in 1978. During those events, I was a teenager, and I realized that if we do not understand and respect our differences, we will not be able to celebrate our commonalities. I have carried this lesson with me since then, and for the past 40 years of my work.

The Niwano Peace Prize values and ethos of supporting peace through interreligious dialogue and cooperation is a core part of my personal and professional commitment for the past 40 years. Having worked in many violent conflict areas, I have witnessed the destruction that wars can bring on the lives of innocent civilians and on our environment. Establishing a path for peace and justice through faith is certainly a challenging mission that not many people are willing to take. However, in our current global reality, supporting peace and justice through interfaith dialogue is much needed to counter the consistent manipulation of religious identity and symbols by certain politicians and religious actors to justify wars and violence against the “other”.

I believe that supporting narratives and discourses of peace and justice through interfaith peacebuilding, should be an integral part of the mission of politicians and religious leaders and

---

<sup>1</sup> Coleman Barks’ translations, *The Essential Rumi*, *The Book of Love*, and *The Big Red Book*.

institutions involved in peacebuilding. Such a mission can effectively confront the weaponization of religious identities which have caused a great deal of suffering among humans throughout history, and unfortunately continues till today.

Across many conflict situations around the globe, we face similar dynamics in which the majority of people are caught into cycles of violence that perpetuate injustice, and deprive them and others of the basic rights for freedom and security. Spirituality and interfaith solidarity have offered many peacemakers a path to break away from the cycles of revenge and dehumanization of the other.

We (humans) are still struggling to learn from the wisdom of our great peacemakers, such as Martin Luther King (Jr.), Dalai Lama, Mahatma Gandhi, and Abdul Ghaffar “Badshah” Khan who adopted faith based nonviolent and peacemaking philosophies and strategies. Yet here we are in 2024, failing to learn the basic lesson that militarization and weaponization will not solve deep rooted conflicts, such as the current Israeli-Palestinian and Ukraine and Russia wars. On the contrary, they are creating more religious, ethnic, racial, and national divides between people and leaving no winners.

Our way to further advance and promote genuine peace on all levels (global, national, local, and interpersonal) is by returning to the basic common values of common humanity, equality, compassion, empathy, witnessing truth, deeper listening and understanding of each other’s pain and needs. Integrating this basic principle of peacemaking in our education, media, art, and all other cultural and political agencies is a crucial step towards the prevention of further structural and social forms of violence. It is the cornerstone of building local, national, and global cultures of peace.

Although this is a happy and joyful occasion, I much appreciate the acknowledgement and recognition of the Niwano Peace Foundation, I must speak up about the recent mass killing and genocidal campaign that is carried out by Israeli military and settler forces in Gaza and West Bank. The Palestinian people have been subject to displacement and denial of the human right of living in freedom and dignity. The Israeli government, endorsed by the United States, Germany, and the UK and several other governments, have used starvation to ethnically cleanse Palestinians from Gaza. The scale of destruction is unprecedented in this conflict and in many other conflicts around the world. The Israeli military has destroyed 2/3 of Gaza’s homes, schools, and universities which as a result are declared as uninhabitable. Over 1000 mosques have been destroyed. Even during Ramadan Muslims in Gaza could not find places to worship or even find food. The killing of 32 thousands people in which 2/3 are women and children and over 80,000 injured, has left everyone in the region wondering about the value of international law or international treaties and even the roles and functions of the UN if they are unable to provide the basic protection for Palestinian civilians.

I am also aware and stand against the loss of lives and killing of Israeli Jewish civilians on October 7th and I stand against holding any hostages whether they are Palestinian prisoners or Israeli or foreign international.

This war has illustrated the influence and power of the military industries around the world, especially in Europe and the US. It also revealed the extent and scale of anti Arab/Palestinian racism and the deep islamophobia in such societies and around the world. The hate speech and dehumanization against Palestinians and Muslims became more visible in the social media and formal media who supported the genocidal war.

Yes, we live in a dark age and in a period where a genocide is being live streamed like a reality show, except it does not have a happy ending to the Palestinian people of Gaza and elsewhere.

It is hard to sustain the belief and faith in humanity when you see starving children and airplanes dropping little food on the heads of Gazans as if the war is caused by an earthquake or tsunami.

In these past six months, like many other peacemakers who are committed to justice and nonviolence resistance, I have struggled and felt the pain and helplessness and hopelessness of many people around the world, who wanted to stop the war and could not persuade their politicians or influence decision makers to intervene. I have been in many organizations and communities who struggle to deal with the genocidal campaign on Gaza.

Despite this cruel reality, I still think and believe that we peacemakers ought to be extra active and invest more intensive efforts to stand up against the atrocities and hate speech that are carried in the name of self-defense or to fulfill certain false messianic religious prophecies of destruction and expulsion.

Unfortunately not all those who defined themselves as peacemakers speak up or stand up against oppression. They also joined the silent and are in some cases complacent. Many interfaith dialogue and interreligious peacemaking initiatives were affected by the conflict and they became silent. Their silence is the toughest for me and many other colleagues who expected solidarity and human compassion instead of silence or the “neutrality” of the conflict resolvers.

In his poem, Rumi has also guided us to seek hope to escape and avoid darkness:

“If you are seeking, seek us with joy  
For we live in the kingdom of joy.  
Do not give your heart to anything else  
But to the love of those who are clear joy,  
Do not stray into the neighborhood of despair.  
For there are hopes: they are real, they exist –  
Do not go in the direction of darkness –  
I tell you: suns exist.”

On the other hand, this conflict has also brought hope and spirit of resilience to many interreligious peacemakers who appreciated and took part in the global solidarity for justice for Palestine. Globally, millions of people spoke up and firmly stood and protested in the streets every week. Also courageous people of faith and their constituencies advocated for justice and for immediate Ceasefire. Social media outlets transmitted billions of messages and images of solidarity. We saw human creativity producing words and images in support of humanity.

This wave of creative protest and solidarity renewed my belief in humanity and in our capacity to reiterate our faith and beliefs to restore our common humanity. No matter how small our actions are, their cumulative effect is significant in the lives of those who are in need of our assistance and sympathy. I saw a simple drawing calling for ceasefire by an American young artist being circulated among Palestinians and their solidarity movement.

The hope for peace, freedom and dignity for Palestinians and all indigenous people and all human beings who feel oppression and injustice was rekindled by the interfaith and interreligious agencies who stood their ground in the past six months. So I felt that I must recognize them in this award ceremony.

I have been working on interreligious peacebuilding with five principles that I would like to reiterate them here, they have helped me and other in sustaining our energy for peace during these hard times:

1. Recognizing and celebrating the beauty of human diversity.
2. Bringing the hearts into the process of building peace and solving conflicts.
3. Standing for the marginalized and voiceless anywhere and everywhere.
4. Promoting the art of imagining peace in the darkest moments
5. Making space in our work for spirituality and faith to do their magic in unlocking the poisoned hearts.

Finally, allow me to again acknowledge that the commitment of the Niwano Peace Foundation to supporting peace work around the world and insisting on peaceful means in achieving our visions and needs is a source of hope and encouragement, too. I am grateful for your recognition and support. It inspires me to further continue and invest in supporting peacebuilding within and across religious and national divides.

Allow me to finish with a poem of a Sufi master, Ibn Arabi, about beauty of religious diversity:

**A garden amidst fires!**

My heart has become receptive of every form:  
it is a pasture for gazelles, a monastery for Christian monks,  
A temple for idols, the Ka'bah of the pilgrim,  
the tables of the Torah, and the book of the Qur'an.  
I follow the religion of love. Wherever its camel mounts turn,  
that is my religion and my faith

Al Salam Alikum

Sincerely

Prof. Mohammed Abu-Nimer,  
Professor and Chair of Said Abdul Aziz for Peace and Conflict Resolution,  
American University & Salam Institute for Peace and Justice, President